

SHE WAS *HIS* WIFE

A NOVEL

BY

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" MATTHEW TINDALE "

" THE FAWCETTS AND GARAGE "

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IN MEMORIAM

EMMA LITTLE *née* VARTY-SMITH
obit March, 1918

J CHARLES VARTY-SMITH
obit November, 1924

GEORGE VARTY-SMITH
obit November, 1924

“ There’s a breathless hush in the Close to-night,
Ten to make and the match to win
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
An hour to play and the last man in
And it’s not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
Or the selfish hope of a season’s fame,
But the Captain’s hand on his shoulder smote—
‘ Play up! Play up! And play the game! ’ ”

Henry Newbolt

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INTRODUCTION

LONG ASHES was built by Peter Carmichael—the first, in 1829, and was solid-looking and square, with large rooms and long corridors. He had made his money in London, and desirous of founding a family which would take a certain position in the county, he bought up the land that surrounded Long Ashes as it came into the market, bit by bit, farm by farm, until the Long Ashes estate numbered some two thousand acres.

So he believed in trade and in its power to set a man on his feet. And when in later life he had finished his four o'clock dinner, he never failed to get up from his chair, and with glass of port in hand would drink to—"The Queen—the City of London, and the Trade thereof."

In the summer of 1840 he married. This was after the building of Long Ashes, and before he had acquired much land. He had been at school with the girl's brother, and had known her ever since the first winter when the boys had met in order to practise those curves on the ice in which the outer edge of the skate comes into play. After this he had forgotten her with the courteous superiority of a boy in whose eyes

girls are silly things. But a day came when they were no longer boy and girl, and falling in with her by chance, he was duly impressed. It was at a meet of the local pack of hounds, for by this time he was able to afford the luxury of a horse to ride and a day off from business. She was mounted upon a white horse, and certainly looked charming in her long and full-skirted habit, her soft, broad-brimmed hat with its ostrich feather and flowing veil. But that she should be present at a meet gave him a distinct shock. He did not like it, he told himself; it was unseemly that she should be there where men of all classes congregated. And was she not actually speaking to one of the hounds and trying to get its attention! Whatever would the Master think of her? And now the Master was speaking to her, and she was giving him some sort of laughing reply. Most certainly she ought not to be there. She was pretty. Yes, very pretty; he would admit that; and she even sat straight on her horse, and he approved of the way in which she held her reins and whip. He had often spoken contemptuously of women riders, and he knew a good rider when he saw one. Still, she ought not to have been there. If he got the opportunity he would speak to her brother about it. Doubtless it was his doing that she was there at all. He would be proud of his sister; yes, that would be it; he would want to show her off to other men. But stay—that was a beastly thought: “showing her off” as though she were a dog or

favourite horse. No, the thought could not be tolerated. Then he forgot to argue with himself, entirely forgot, in fact he fell to admiring the charming picture she made in the clear space in which the white horse stood. But this meet was not the last that Catherine Harvey attended, and soon Peter Carmichael found himself sparing the time more frequently for a day's hunting and the prospect of seeing her. So in due time Catherine Harvey became Peter Carmichael's wife.

And he made more and yet more money. Stables and coach-houses were planned; and the long carriage drive was laid out, and more ash trees were planted beside those that already stood and gave the name to the house. Then a lodge was built, so that at no time should his wife be compelled to pause by the outer gate being closed, when driving her phaeton drawn by the dappled-grey pony whose tail nearly touched the ground.

Meanwhile two daughters were born to him, little Betsy Ann and Belinda, dark and pretty like their mother. And at the week-ends when he was home from London, he took delight in watching them as they were drawn backwards and forwards in a little go-cart in which they sat *vis-à-vis*, the nurses being forbidden to go beyond the lodge gates.

A little later the much desired son and heir was born, and this event brought about what in Peter Carmichael's eyes was the coping-stone upon the edifice he was so carefully building.

He had wished to found a family, and here was the boy who was to carry on the name. And he was called Peter, that the firm in the City of London, well known for its honourable dealings, should continue to trade under its founder's name with the proud addition "and Son." The child had his father's colouring, differing from his little sisters, and this in the father's eyes was a matter of pride: "He is a true Carmichael," he would say.

And this little child grown to man's estate, married and passed on the heritage of oval face, blue-grey eyes with their rather earnest and kindly outlook, to his son, the Peter of the present day—Peter Carmichael the third, and sole representative of the firm of Carmichael & Son in the City. His father, Peter the second, early joined his kinsfolk who lay in the village churchyard, as also did his aunts, Betsy Ann and Belinda. The latter were to him but faded memories, tall and slight, gentle of manner and with soft, low-toned voices. He would recall the fact that they had been beautiful by looking at the two oil-paintings which hung in the dining-room, side by side with that of his father, the father to whom it was said he bore a strong resemblance.

So it was that Peter Carmichael the third came to reign at Long Ashes

PART I

CHAPTER I

LONG ASHES

THE front of the Georgian house was bathed in the sunshine of an early June morning, and the windows, at this hour of 10 a.m., shone as polished mirrors—eight of them in the upper row, and four on each side of the entrance door which stood open and led into the panelled hall. Peter Carmichael had stepped out of the window opening upon the dining-room, and which for convenience sake he had had fashioned into the French style opening direct upon the terrace which ran the full length of the house, as also the corresponding window that led into the smaller drawing-room.

Peter Carmichael was comparing his watch with the hour which had just struck by the clock in the stable-yard at the back of the house. Was it ten minutes since he left the breakfast table? He thought, "She is long in finding my present. I wonder if I have hidden it too securely." He smiled amusedly, then took out his pipe and began filling it. He was dressed in the knickerbocker suit he usually wore on the days on which he did not go up to Town. Carmichael was neither young nor old. He might be eight and thirty or thereabouts, but was in reality forty-

three; but no one but the carping gossips at the time of his marriage dwelt on this fact. Only to himself did the discrepancy between his age and that of his young wife come occasionally as a disturbing thought.

He lighted his pipe.

The clock in the stable-yard struck the quarter. Carmichael stood motionless. "Oh, Betty, Betty, my lassie; I should have thought you would have been clever enough to have found that little morocco case." He turned his head slightly in the direction of the open french window, through which he had come. Taking the pipe out of his mouth he gave his full attention to the slight sounds that reached him. A little patter of high heels on the oak floor beyond the Persian carpet. Then silence. A girlish laugh. A little cry of impatience. After this her clear call to him for help: "Peter dear, I cannot tell where you have put your present. I am looking on the sideboard now. Am I hot or cold?"

"Hot"

"All right. Here it is!"

There followed the crackling of paper; the tearing of it; half exclamations of joy, of thanks, of reproaches that anything so beautiful should be given to her.

Carmichael, hearing these sounds, laughed, proud of his selection of the present.

Suddenly Betty Carmichael stood in the window, the wife of Peter Carmichael. Of middle height, slight and girlish. The sunshine

tell upon her golden hair and burnished it. Her bluish-grey eyes were sparkling with glee, and she was laughing aloud.

He held out a hand to her. To him, she was part of the glory of the summer morning.

She sprang down the few steps, for it is good to be in the vigorous health of youth, and it is good to be beautiful, and it is good to be the wife of a good man.

"You are a darling!" she cried, and held up a long string of pearls.

"You like them?"

"They are sweeter than words."

"That's all right."

"Peter darling, they are far too good for me I said a small string of pearls"

"But this is the first anniversary of our wedding and your twenty-first birthday."

"Yes, and a dance here to-night. Oh, Peter, you do make me happy." She pirouetted in front of him, her soft white dress floating about her with each twirl.

Peter Carmichael stood a full head above the girl, his straight, upright figure, his grey, shapely head, and something in the pose of it, giving him the air of a *grand seigneur*.

He watched her making her graceful turns and twists, smiling and amused.

"Put your pearls round your neck, Betty."

Lightly, swiftly she danced away from him, swaying the string of pearls in front of her, and passing them from hand to hand. Then she tiptoed back again to him.

"I want you to wear them first," she said, and assayed to place the string over his head. "Stoop"

He bent his head in obedience, and she put the pearls over it and round his neck, while she stood first on one tiptoe then on the other in her effort to arrange the string to her liking

"You look splendid, Peter." The girl turned her head from side to side as she surveyed him "I know!" she exclaimed from a sudden thought, "you shall wear them to-night instead of me! How delightful! And everyone will stare at you!"

"I should say they would." He laughed, gently trying to free himself from the pearls. "You little monkey! What else would you like me to do at this dance of yours?"

"I don't think there is anything else" She laid a hand caressingly upon a lapel of his coat, looking up at him with swift gravity.

"Peter——"

"Yes, dear?"

"I do love you."

"And do I not love you?" He smoothed the golden-brown head that had been shorn, ruthlessly, as he had thought, of its tresses. His voice was tender, and he stooped down and kissed her forehead.

She nestled against his heart, and for one long moment his arms held her, after which he put her away from him gently.

"What about your peacocks, Betty?"

"The darlings"

Her momentary mood of gravity passed as quickly as it had come, and laughing, she rallied Peter Carmichael for having wasted her time when she should have been off to feed her peacocks; for was it not half an hour since the stable-boy, whose duty it was to bring her corn for the birds, had put the basket on the step outside the french window.

She caught up the basket, and stood for a few moments to give him a nod and a smile, then running across the carriage drive, she entered one of the grassy paths that led down to the gardens.

As Carmichael stood watching the slight, flying figure, he sighed; then as if to divert his thoughts he looked over the far-flung landscape to the silver line upon the horizon that marked the sea. His eyes travelled slowly from that line over the fields of green waving corn, over woodlands, grassy stretches of arable land, of farmsteads that he counted as his own and which one by one had come into the possession of the Carmichaels. Finally his eyes rested upon the uncultivated land which had escaped the plough. It was specially beloved of Betty. Soon the gorse and broom would be out-rivaling the sun in its glory and pouring out scents of honeyed sweetness.

To the left the sun shone upon the steeple of a church embedded in trees and some few chimneys taller than the rest, where the village lay; and upon the belt of fir trees that edged the lane running from the village in the direction of

Long Ashes. And nearer still, upon the oak trees, lovely in their tender green, which stood solitary and with wide-spreading arms in the bit of land that divided the gardens of Long Ashes from the lane itself

Peter Carmichael was smoking abstractedly, his eyes moving slowly over the distant landscape; then as if actuated by some sudden thought, he looked swiftly and observantly over the gardens at his feet, those gardens that had risen up as if by magic to do honour to the coming of the young wife, and which ran somewhat abruptly down from Long Ashes, the house itself standing rather high. They were gardens of loveliness and made at Betty's instigation.

The wonder of the scene brought contentment to Peter Carmichael. "Betty can but love it, can but be happy," he told himself.

His mind went back to the day when he first met her at the house of her bachelor uncle, his old school-friend, now Rector of a place in Norfolk. How shy she had been, and how her uncle had rallied her at being dismayed on being told that this was Mr. Peter Carmichael, who came every year on an all-too-brief visit. "No need to be shy with him," he had said, and that it was he, a parson, to be shy when he sat in the rectory pew and criticized him.

And Carmichael's thoughts ran on the brief history that had been told him, of how Betty had been born and brought up on an Australian farm, an only child. How her mother had died

leaving the child when very young, and how her father had sent her to Sydney to be educated. And on the death of her father, friendless and with but a poor pittance, the only solution to the difficulty seemed to her uncle, was that he should ask her to come and live with him.

So for several years Peter Carmichael had watched the child grow up from childhood to mature girlhood, and she had come to be constantly in his thoughts.

"What a damned fool I am," he had reflected. "Why the devil am I so attracted by this bit of a chit, a child in comparison with myself. And yet I would not care twopence what the whole world would think were she to marry me. I'm years older than she is. It's unwise. It's a fool's trick—and yet, and yet—— My God, I love her"

That Betty liked him was an assured fact, but whether she loved him was another matter. For Betty coquetted with him, played with him; at times pretending she was tired of his company, at others she would be preternaturally serious and assume the gravity of the middle-aged woman as she conceived it to be. Then it was that Carmichael with his small knowledge of women would wonder if all girls were made on the same pattern? If all were like beautiful gardens that are full of the tangle of roses, sweet-scented and dew-laden, and having grassy paths that led nowhere in particular—gardens upon which eyes may look, but into which no foot may enter? So ever hesitating, Peter Carmichael yet took heart of grace and asked her

to be his wife. And with downcast eyes and blushes she had whispered that she loved him very much and would marry him.

Youthful in a sense Carmichael looked that morning in June as he stood on the terrace, his eyes taking a meditative survey of the glory of the scene that lay stretched out before him. If his hair was somewhat grey, he yet carried his years well, without any stoop of shoulder or of neck, while the fresh clearness of his complexion marked the lover of fields and woods, of long walks, of acquaintance with sunrises, and of dew-laden grass that shone as diamonds, emeralds, or rubies with each turn of the head. Peter Carmichael knew the hour when the lark would be the first denizen of the sky. He knew the scent of the leaves when the rays of the sun first touched them, and the charm of the long shadows of early morning. And was not the air, chilled and sweetened by the night, exhilarating? and did it not whip up muscles and veins into something of the buoyancy of youth?

John Merton, the Long Ashes estate agent, in dark grey tweeds and light tie, his sunburnt face freed to the wind by his hat being pushed to the back of his head, was coming up the broad carriage drive, the slight noise his feet made on the gravel catching Carmichael's attention. John Merton was an Englishman of Scotch extraction, and was assiduously careful of his master's interests, more especially of the small sums, this trait being inherited, as he would

proudly explain, from his ancestors whom he greatly revered. One of them had actually taken part in the rising of 1745, following his liege lord over the Border, and in the end dying for him. When his employer was in a humorous mood, he would say sometimes, "Eh, man, but ye're a born Scot," which would mightily please Merton. He had been the estate agent for twenty-five years—and Carmichael believed in him, as he believed in Carmichael.

Then as Carmichael went towards him, Merton respectfully replaced his hat.

"Morning, Merton."

"Good morning, Mr. Carmichael. You're enjoying the sunshine."

Carmichael, ignoring the remark, asked if there was anything of importance needing discussion.

"Nothing much, sir. Only a letter from Mr. James Aspendale." He held up a small sheaf of letters as he spoke. "I would like you to see it."

"Better come indoors then."

And Merton, puffing slightly—he had put on weight during the past ten years, and the walk up the hill from the village, albeit but a quarter of a mile away, had tried him on that June morning which already gave promise of greater warmth.

Three minutes later the two men were seated in the room known as Carmichael's office, den, or whatever term happened at the moment to suit the speaker.

Carmichael sat in the revolving chair in front of the roll-topped desk, his agent in front of him.

"How does Aspendale like The Grange?" asked Carmichael.

"Yes—he likes it—says he does not mind even if you put up his rent——"

"You did not say anything of that kind, I hope," interrupted Carmichael.

"Oh, no. Certainly not. It is his way. He called to see me yesterday morning, and said what pleased him better than anything was the fact of there being no ships." Merton laughed.

"Ships!"

"Yes. A queer man. But I would like you to read this letter which I got from him this morning."

He passed a letter to Carmichael, who opened it and spread it out on the desk.

It ran as follows:

"June 13th.

"MR. MERTON.

"DEAR SIR,—As you are Mr Carmichael's estate agent, I write to you rather than to him, although he is the man to whom I shall be asked to pay the piper. I shall never speak to him on anything connected with my renting of The Grange. I consider such an action is vulgar. You are the constituted go-between. My house-keeper tells me the oven does not draw well, and she wishes that you would send a mason to see to it. It was the same trouble in the house I rented in Kent. Personally, I do not believe

there is anything wrong with the oven. Mrs. Pybus has ovens and door-scrapers on the brain. You will notice the two things are unrelated. Mrs. Pybus controverts this. Between ourselves, it is Mrs. Pybus's brain. Defective action, that's what it is. But in order to satisfy her and keep her quiet I promised I would tell you. Therefore do not send a mason, and whatever you may feel the consequences may be, do not mention the oven or the front-door scraper to her. She is my cook as well as my house-keeper, and her husband is my butler-valet. Splendid couple. None better. But my one fault with The Grange is there are no stables. Therefore I think the man who built The Grange must have been mad. I must have stables. I am glad The Grange is ready furnished, though I think it is all very ugly and in bad taste. But I waive my objection. There is only one thing that I have against The Grange, and it is that Mr. Carmichael is married. I would much have preferred him to be single. You will not understand my reason for this. But I have a reason and a very absorbing one. However, I again waive my objection. Things probably cannot be altered. I should like to say finally that I am well pleased with the terms for renting this place, viz., that I can leave at a moment's notice, myself, my servants and my horses. I shall always pay the rent three months in advance. So this must certainly suit your employer, though I hear he is a splendid man, like the

steward in the Bible—no one has ever said this to me, but I think it would be quite likely.

"Do me the favour of showing this letter to your employer.

"I have invited him to dine with me to-morrow I rather fancy you are an astute sort of man If so, impress upon your master that if he asks me any questions he will offend me. Tell him it is a vulgar action

"Yours faithfully,

"JAMES ASPENDALE "

Carmichael folded up the letter, and looking across at Merton, laughed quizzically.

"He's a bit touched here, Mr. Carmichael" Merton tapped his forehead.

"I thought so Poor chap."

"He's in love with his wife."

"That's not a sign of insanity, anyway."

"It is in this case. He divorced her."

"Regrets it?"

"Can't say, Mr. Carmichael"

Carmichael stretched himself, flinging his arms above his head and half stifling a yawn, said: "I wonder what sort of a host he will make to-morrow at dinner However, the point is, whether we may not regret his coming to The Grange You see, Merton, it would be a bit awkward if he——"

He stopped, not finishing the sentence

"I've seen to that, Mr Carmichael, even if he gets more than a bit cracky."

"I am quite sure you will have done that,

Merton. And now if you have no other business to discuss, I will walk with you down the hill, and we will go and have a look at that shed we are having put up on Kindleton's farm."

CHAPTER II

BETTY CARMICHAEL

SHE had reached the rose-garden, and after burying her face in some of the cool, sweet flowers, she stood looking up at the house, its long double row of windows aglow with the bright June sunshine, then at the fair expanse of gardens, an innocent, childlike joy of possession filling her heart. How beautiful it all was. And it was hers because it was Peter's Dear, kind Peter.

She passed on to the garden of sweet scents. Here the bees kept a low, murmurous humming. Flowers trembled and swayed on their stems as the bees with suddenly muffled wings sought entrance to the stores of honey. In this garden of sweet scents the paths were green, the grass being closely cut and soft to the tread.

Along these paths went Betty, carolling to herself, patches of sunshine and shadow flecking her white dress. She caught at a leaf here, at a flower there, crushing them lightly between her palms to get at their fragrance.

After the sunshine it was pleasant to reach the shade of the pine trees which bordered the entrance to the peacocks' enclosure

BETTY CARMICHAEL

She unlatched the gates of the enclosure which was in part given over to a wilderness of long grass, in part to a patch that was mown, and went in.

The peacocks had disappeared into their farthest retreat beyond the undergrowth, so long had been the accustomed coming of their mistress with her basket of delectable things.

"Toby, Toby," she called. "Come, my beauties." And she lifted the grain in the basket up in her hand and let it trickle down with a soft, sough-like sound.

There was a narrow space in the undergrowth, and down this space went Betty, and she remembered how, not so long ago, when taking her husband to have a close inspection of the birds, he had held up the long trailing branches of a bramble that she might the more securely pass under them. There had been several of them in his hand, and one had suddenly slipped from him, grazing her cheek and leaving one rather long scratch. She called to mind his horror-stricken expression, which for so small a matter had made her laugh. But the remembrance of his gentleness, his tenderness, his self-reproaches, sent a sudden thrill of love for him through her heart. Dear, kind Peter!

He had had the bramble bush removed, and so she securely went along the path.

"Toby, Toby," she called.

And as she emerged from the roughly kept path, the birds came to her—glorious creatures

in their mantles of blue, green and coppery plumage. They circled about her, Toby in his pride of position, taking a grain of corn from her fingers.

"You are proud and vain, Toby. But you are beautiful, Toby, and you come when I call."

The girlish figure moved swiftly among the birds, tossing grain in the air and laughing to see their clumsy antics as they tried to catch it.

"There—you have got all," and she emptied her basket over the jewelled back of Toby. "Confetti for you, my Toby, as they threw over me a year ago to-day." She looked down amusedly at the bird. "If you could only play tennis with me, Toby, you would be a real treasure. And if I could but have a game! You see, Peter has all his farms to see to—and his business letters—and going to London—besides, he does not much care for tennis—his rheumatic knee troubles him. Oh, well, Toby, we cannot have everything in this world."

She went to a rustic seat which had been erected in the farther end of the peacock enclosure, by her special desire.

From it could be seen the widespread valley, its fields of green waving corn, its meadows, its river winding about with slow movement; its clusters of trees; its hedgerows breaking out into the flower of the wild rose; and nearer, the bit of park-like land that was divided from the Long Ashes garden by a ha-ha. A peaceful scene

A curl of bluish smoke rose from a chimney

of The Grange, the house that was to be let to James Aspendale. "They are burning wood," remarked Betty to herself. The next moment she had turned her attention to a long stone building known as The White House, which stood farther away and was divided from Long Ashes by the park, a thick belt of trees, and several fields, some in grass some in corn.

Betty looked long and steadily at The White House. It belonged to her husband and was occupied by the Lamleys. But it was of Captain Hugh Lamley that Betty was actually thinking rather than of the house itself. He was at home from India on leave, and had come up rather frequently to Long Ashes for a game of tennis. This Betty had greatly enjoyed, for he was a good player; and he, entering into her desire to improve her playing, had helped her considerably, particularly in her service, which had been weak. But of late he had come but seldom, and Betty wondered

As she sat looking across at The White House, a playful, half-mischievous idea came to her. What fun if Captain Lamley could be signalled to, and made to understand that if he would come by the path that she could see, across the fields and through the wood, to play a game of tennis, he would be welcome. Suppose she gave her Australian cooe?

But where to stand so as to be seen and heard by Captain Lamley?

At the end of the enclosure a barrier or wall of roughly hewn stone had been raised; and at

its central point a kind of pillar had been built some twenty feet high, huge, angular and difficult to climb. On the top of this pillar a broad flat stone had been placed, making a kind of platform from which to obtain a very wide view of the surrounding country.

Betty looked meditatively at the pillar of stone. She had never tried to climb it, but Peter had told her he had climbed it many a time as a boy, standing upright on the flat stone at the top, from which a clear view for miles around could be obtained. Surely this flat stone would afford a point of vantage from which she could signal to Captain Lamley. And if Peter as a boy had climbed it, then why not she?

The spirit of youth ran strong in her, and she became fired with a desire to reach that vantage point. The thought of the muscular feat allured her. She wanted to expend that exuberant vitality on something. She was like an unbroken creature of nature that scents adventure in the air. Why should she not climb this rugged pillar? There would be risk, but was not that for which she was thirsting?

With eager and excited expression she looked at the pillar, measuring its twenty feet of roughly built stone. And as she did this her imagination endued the inanimate pillar with life. It mocked her. It dared her to pit her skill and her puny strength against its height—its small crevices as footholds—its narrow, jutting points which alone her fingers could grasp. "All very well," it said, "for a boy to come up my face safely,

but you—you will slip, fall, strike out vainly, and you will be cruelly hurt." It seemed to cry aloud threateningly: "Reach my summit, and your head to which like a fool you trust, or to the sureness of your feet—either head or feet may fail, and you will crash down—down—down, past the ha-ha on which my outer base stands—past the steep, smooth, grassy slope—fall forty feet below, and——"

She mocked the pillar. "You are dead," she cried aloud. "I am full of life. I want something to wrestle with—something to overcome."

She took off her string of pearls and hung it over the branch of a tree, and went to the base of the stone pillar.

With one glance at its rough, hewn side, she began her climb. This was at first easy, and so was the next move upward. Slowly hand by hand, foot by foot, till she had got up the first eight feet or so of the pillar. Then she realized that it was likely to be more difficult to reach the top than she had thought.

Her thin shoes did not take sufficient hold upon the stones. Her left foot had slipped twice from the shallow crevice to which she was trusting; and her right foot was threatening to do the same. She was absolutely fearless, but she recognized the insecurity of her position.

And now her fingers—were they not showing less power of grasping those jutting stones which alone showed safety? Oh, she was slipping! She cried aloud—she struggled with feet and hands. Her knee was being bruised against the

jagged edge of the rock. She must fight! She must struggle! Her feet must scrape and find some hold! And her hands! No matter if they were being torn! One more struggle and the flat stone at the top would be reached.

At last, thank God, the safety of the flat, top-most stone was gained. Trembling and gasping for breath, she knelt upon it. She closed her eyes. She was terrified. She felt she had been near death.

Minute after minute passed, and she regained some tranquillity. Her hands were only slightly scratched, she told herself on looking at them. And she had had the excitement of climbing the pillar! For certainly it had been exciting. And it would be something to boast of—certainly it would be that. Oh, yes, she was very glad she had done it—very proud indeed. She would boast of it to Gwendoline Lamley. But she would not tell how for one moment she had actually thought she was going to fall. But indeed, in thinking it over quietly, it simply meant that she had been foolish for one moment, and not actually in danger.

So with the elasticity of youth, and with something of its foolhardiness, Betty gradually regained self-possession, and even laughed at herself. "Well," she said contemptuously, "I have indeed been a most awful nunny."

Recovered, she got to her feet, and looking round at the widespread landscape, seen for the first time by her from this high vantage ground, she drew in her breath quickly at the glory of

the scene. She gazed intently and marvelled at it. What a beautiful world! Even this little patch of it! How entrancing! And for several minutes she had forgotten the cause which had brought her to this vantage ground.

But it was not to see this far distant panorama of fields, woods, water, and the distant line of the horizon that she had made this climb. The actual reason had somehow lost something of its charm. Still, she had taken the climb, had reached what was certainly an excellent position from which to give her signal—and a game of tennis was still a very entrancing thought—so why not give her Australian cooe which had always amused Captain Lamley. If he heard it, he would certainly recognize it and guess from whom it came.

So, carefully balancing herself, she stood upright on the flat stone, and with open hands held round her mouth, she gave a long, clear "Cooee."

There was no reply.

Again she sent out the musical call, and yet again.

This time came a long, clear whistle. It seemed to be from someone in the thirty-acre wood which bounded that side of the park nearest to The White House.

Again it came. Three distant whistles as she had given her three cooees.

Her colour deepened. So he had heard and was coming.

She sat down on the flat stone trembling

from excitement. To get down from it was now her one desire. For him to come and find her still at her post of observation would have been embarrassing. He would want to help her down; and she did not want to be helped down. She wanted to be dignified, the fear taking possession of her that her behaviour had been anything but dignified.

So with her feet over the edge of the stone platform, she slipped, half-fell, and finally dropped to the ground with scratched hands and with an inclination to cry.

For the fun of the adventure had gone, and in its place had come regret at having openly signalled to Captain Lamley. What would he think? What would Peter think?

Her face was flushed, her chest heaving, her breath coming in short, quick gasps

Trying hard for self-control, she took the string of pearls from the branch of the tree where she had hung it for safety; and sitting down on the rustic seat, gave some attention to the hand which was the most badly scratched. She bound her handkerchief round it, for she did not want Captain Lamley to see the evidence of her clumsy climbing of the stone pillar.

Meanwhile the man who had replied by a whistle to Betty's cooers, had given an ejaculation of fear on catching sight of the white figure clearly outlined against the blue sky where it stood on the topmost stone of the pillar.

"My God, if she falls!" he cried.

To wave to her to get down would be of no use, for though easy for him to see her through the parted branches of the trees, it was doubtful if she could see him. Besides, if startled, she might lose her balance. However, the next moment he saw her preparing to get down, and she disappeared from his sight.

He went quickly along the path through the park and up the stone steps of the ha-ha, and so into the peacocks' enclosure. On coming within sight of her he called.

"Betty, you have given me a bad ten minutes. Whatever tempted you to climb to the top of the pillar?"

She started to her feet.

"Peter! I—I—did not think it was you who whistled."

"Somebody else, eh?" He was still suffering from the anxiety that she had caused him by what he regarded as an act of foolhardiness, and he did not attempt to hide his annoyance.

"As a matter of fact, Peter," she began again, still stammering, "I wanted a game of tennis, and I thought if I cooeed, Captain Lamley if he heard me might come."

"On the principle of whistle and I will come to thee, my lad. But instead of him you got me."

There was still a touch of acidity in Carmichael's voice as in his words, and she was hurt.

"I am sorry, Peter."

She was on the verge of tears, but he laid a hand lightly and tenderly upon her shoulder.

"I would not do a thing of that kind again, Betty," he said quietly. "If at any time you want a game of tennis, send John down with a note asking Gwendoline Lamley and her brother to come up. I make no objection." Then after a moment's pause, he added: "Never climb the pillar rock again. If you had fallen—and fallen that way"—he waved his hand in the direction of the park—"you would have been killed. Never do it again, Betty. You gave me a bad ten minutes, and I have not quite got over it."

"I am sorry, Peter I am most awfully sorry." She took hold of the lapels of his coat, and, as a child will, lifted up her face to be kissed.

CHAPTER III

SISTER AND BROTHER

It was the evening of the same day, and early June though it was, it had been hot.

A warm glow bathed the western front of The White House, while the breeze, hardly moving the leaves of the trees which flickered too feebly for sound, gave but little refreshment. Bees droned intermittently amidst the flower-beds, while far off could be heard the lowing of cattle, the barking of a dog, and the hum of a village green.

Captain Hugh Lamley lay back upon the garden seat. He had thrown away the end of his cigarette, and his hands were locked beneath his close-cropped, dark brown head. There was the suggestion of vigour in the handsome profile, the straight nose with its finely cut nostrils, the firm chin with its clean line of jaw, and in the muscular bronzed throat.

He was a notable figure in his white flannels that took golden tints from the setting sun, now behind the soft-wooded trees of Long Ashes. Seen thus, lying in the soft light of the golden afternoon, he brought to the mind haunting memories of pictures and marbles.

His sister was coming from beneath the trees

at the farther side of the lawn, and walking with swift, decisive step towards him, and seeing her he altered his position slightly, and when she paused beside him he swung his legs sufficiently to one side to make room for her.

But she did not sit down, merely leaned against one of the arms of the garden seat

For a few minutes neither spoke, but the brother noted the heightened colour and the closely pressed lips so like his own

There was almost a defiant pose in the girl's slight figure and in the small head. She wore a short, pleated grey skirt, and with one of the pleats her fingers worked as though some strong emotion needed expression. She rarely wore a hat, a bandeau merely serving to prevent her shingled hair from falling over her face. Her eyes, set under straight eyebrows, were of a light brown, the same colour as her hair. Her nose was straight with a tip that slightly drooped, while her face, youthful, bronzed, and with a low broad forehead, was striking in appearance without being exactly beautiful. She was eighteen—twelve years younger than her brother. Her carriage and expression were triumphantly youthful. The energy of youth was borne witness to in every movement. If she were now silent it was because of suppressed anger.

"What has ruffled Your Highness?" asked her brother after the lapse of a few minutes, a half smile on his face

"You warned me not to lose my temper with Father, but I did."

"More foolish you."

"Not altogether my fault. Father began about the age of machinery, and you know how trying he is when he gets upon that subject."

"And you fought him—was that it, Gwen?"

"I did. I couldn't help it. I was off my guard because you had promised to help me. I was feeling that you had paved the way, and all I had to do was to ask him if he would give me a little two-seater car. And he was beastly to me—simply beastly."

"And you?"

"Probably I was the same. And what is more, I don't care a damn."

"Gwen!"

"You swear, so why shouldn't I?"

"Never before you."

"Hang it all. You are as bad as Mother." The girl moved so that she could sit on the space he had made for her.

"Listen, Hugh. You don't know the boredom of life here. If I look in that direction, everlasting fields and cottages. If I look up there"—she pointed with her small but muscular brown hand—"there stands Long Ashes with its rows and rows of windows. In the morning they are bright, shining and hopeful. In the evening they are gloomy, the sun then being behind Long Ashes. The whole place looks like a house of tragedy."

"But, my dear Gwen, a car would not alter these surroundings."

"I could get away from them."

"Get away!" The speaker's voice and the expression of his face suddenly took on something of gravity. What was wrong with Gwen, he wondered

"Certainly I could get away," the girl continued with yet more vehemence of tone "I would drive for miles upon miles I would simply fly along the roads I would see how far I could go in a day. I would go through the length and breadth of the land"

"Did you say all that to Father?"

"Of course I did. That was the whole point of my argument. I wanted him to understand that I often feel as if all this"—she waved an arm comprehensively towards the landscape—"would choke me"

Captain Lamley turned himself a little the better to see his sister's face, while he caught a twig of an overhanging rose-bush, twisting it and pulling it.

"Do be a little less excited, Gwen," he expostulated.

"But——" she began

"But—but," he echoed, swinging his legs off the garden seat and placing himself nearer to her. "You did everything you could, as it seems to me, to prevent him promising you the car. I have heard a good deal now of what you said, but what did he say?"

"He said I was suffering like everyone else from this age of machinery. It was a curse, he said. It spoiled home life. It filled the homes

with idle women who did not sew, but who scuffled through their duties in order to race about the roads and make the lives of men, women and children unsafe. You know the kind of thing he says."

She had turned towards her brother, and though her eyes met his steadily and widely opened, she hardly saw him, her thoughts being fully occupied with her grievance. But when she spoke again she made some effort to control her anger.

"I have all life spread out before me, Hugh, and I want to, enjoy it to the full. Here in The White House I feel imprisoned—pent-up. Father goes to his office, Mother is busy with her mothers' meetings and things, and Granny sits calmly working at her tapestry curtain—leaf by leaf, scroll by scroll."

"Do not speak of Granny while you are in your present mood, Gwen. She is aloof from us. She lives in a world of quietness such as neither you nor I know."

"She is early-Victorian," put in the girl sharply.

"Then it is a pity that the age we are living in is not early-Victorian. To look on Granny's face, to watch her delicate fingers plying her needle—the very colour of her wools, old blues, faded greens, palest fawn—everything about her speaks of peace."

Captain Hugh Lamley got to his feet, and stood looking down at his sister.

"I cannot bear the stillness of Granny's

room," she returned. "I long to smash the clock with its slow tick, tick. The stillness is maddening to me."

Her brother's face became thoughtful. He was up against a nature he did not understand. As a man he had been accustomed to break down circumstances, or failing in this he would bend to them lest they broke him. But for this tigerish little nature beating against the bars of its cage, he found it difficult to give words of counsel.

"I think, Gwen dear, if you would try to be more reasonable in your demands, Father would give you a two-seater. Bend a little to his wishes."

The girl stared up at him.

"Bend a little to his wishes! Try it—I won't. I am wanting the car excruciatingly."

"Do you need it as much as that?" The speaker laid a hand gently on his sister's shoulder.

"Yes, as much as that. This wonderful thing called life is beating about me like—like—— Oh, don't you see what I mean? The thrill of adventure, of glorious things to do, and I sit here like a stone image, only I am not a stone image! I have a heart inside of me that is in prison, and cries aloud in agony."

He was silent.

"Have you nothing to say to me?" she exclaimed passionately, after a minute's pause.

"There is no royal way through life, Gwen, so far as I know. We have to accept what fate

brings us, and make the best of it. I wish I could help you, little sister."

He was wondering if there was truth in what his father said about machinery sweeping away the natural amusements and employments of men and women. Had machinery so superseded human hands that the very hands that had formed it were becoming paralysed while the brain was tortured?

Suddenly the girl exclaimed:

"You too are bored. Don't think, Hugh, that I haven't noticed it. This is a poor kind of furlough for you—at any rate it was until you began to spend your time at Long Ashes. The beautiful Betty Carmichael is to you what a car would be to me."

A flush slowly crept over her brother's face, deepening its bronzed hue.

"I think, Gwen," he said, slightly nettled, "you need not have brought Mrs. Carmichael's name into this discussion about a car."

She smiled cynically.

"I don't blame you, Hugh. I would do the same myself if I were in your place."

"What are you driving at?"

"Nothing. If you choose to go pretty often up to Long Ashes to play tennis with Betty Carmichael, I cannot see that it matters. I'm not early-Victorian like Granny."

"Mrs. Carmichael but asked me to go up to give her some practice for the Tournament," he returned rather lamely.

"Why apologize? It isn't worth it."

"I am not apologizing."

"Sounded like it."

"I shall be glad if you will not mix up my name with Mrs. Carmichael's."

"Very well. But I have eyes, Hugh "

The young man, his lips compressed, stood erect, staring across the garden, seeing neither the far-off hedge with its trail of honeysuckle, nor the oak trees beyond.

In a few minutes the girl spoke :

"Hugh, we should be going in to dress. We dine earlier to-night because of the dance at Long Ashes—Betty Carmichael's birthday party."

"Thank you for reminding me "

He turned away with his long, smooth stride. At any other time he would have waited for his sister, but she had made him feel at variance with himself, and this experience is to taste bitterness.

He faced the sunset which now filled the western sky with brilliance. The house of Long Ashes stood out dark and sombre against it. The very windows were dark—the gardens a widespread shadow.

There came the raucous cry of a peacock—far distant. Then another

Captain Hugh Lamley stood as one entranced. He was looking up at the Georgian mansion which stood far above him, a good mile away. He was no longer questioning himself or taking himself to task. A living thing within him had run riot, and he was in a cosmos wherein dwelt

Betty Carmichael alone. He saw her face, her eyes. He thrilled to the childlike graciousness of her presence. He held her in his arms—he was away—away in a golden illuminated space; a space that spread from the western horizon to the zenith. He and Betty Carmichael were alone in that space—alone in the universe.

The radiance of the west was upon his face. His eyes were fixed upon the gold and crimson bars of the sunset, but he saw only what the eyes of his soul were gazing upon in ecstasy. He was breathing gently, deeply. He was in the world in which there is neither time nor space.

With a start he came back to the world of reality, and in a few seconds there came into his veins the mighty power of youth, with the zest of the hunter who, marking his quarry, goes over moor and rocks and quagmire in wild pursuit. For a moment it went to his brain, and for that one moment he realized that, in connection with Betty Carmichael, he cared neither for man nor devil.

But as suddenly as the tiger in him had sprung to life, so was it forced back by that something which is in every man, and which if he so wills it will reign supreme. And so it was with Hugh Lamley. He remembered that Betty was Peter Carmichael's wife.

He lost sight of the golden sky. There stood out for him but the house of Long Ashes, dark, sombre, its windows as sightless as death. No ray of the glory of the evening touched it. And

he remembered that his sister had said that to her there hung over it the shadow of tragedy. Was it true? Did tragedy as a shadow hang over the house?

Hugh Lamley shivered, then he came back to the world of prosaic things, and with a word to his sister he went up in the direction of the house.

There was Mrs Carmichael's party to-night. And *pace* Gwendoline, it would be his duty to ask his hostess for the favour of a dance.

CHAPTER IV

CHANGES

THERE was no controverting the fact that during the past year, life at Long Ashes had changed. Peter Carmichael recognized it and acquiesced. The years that had preceded it had been quiet, reposeful, uneventful—perhaps even dull, though he had never found them so—while these new days had been full of life and stir. But this he looked upon as natural. Still the old days were pleasant to look back upon. They were to him as a walled-in garden, warm, sweet-scented, sunny, with the hum of insects, the sighing of trees, the rippling of far-off waters.

To think of those days—to dwell on them was to sink into an atmosphere in which detail was lost, and in which he was conscious of nothing save a narcotic-like soothing of jaded nerves. Into this daydream he would fall when physical weariness had told upon him. It might be after a long day in London—when he had been with his co-directors discussing the business affairs of that still thriving concern, Peter Carmichael & Son Ltd.—and coming back physically and mentally weary, he sought refreshment by

closing his eyes upon the Long Ashes of to-day. Or again, after a morning gallop with Betty he had spent many hours in walking over his farms and talking with his tenants, he would seek forgetfulness and slip into the atmosphere of the past. Moreover, there were times when a consideration of his new cares forced itself upon him. The temperament of the young life that now shared his was puzzling. Its very buoyancy was baffling. Yet he was happy with Betty. He loved her with the steadfast love of a man no longer young. And he believed his love to be returned. However, he was as one against whom a warm southern wind has caught up a swirl of rose leaves and dashed them across his face, causing him to close his eyes in a vain effort to get away from the wind that he might see the loveliness of the leaves.

He would argue with himself that he was hardly to blame in finding it difficult to understand an energy which was that of a child in playful mood. And if Betty's sudden gravity would at times startle him, that must be regarded but as another mood. He believed her to be happy, and beyond that what did anything matter?

One thought, however, was persistent, and projected itself beyond its fellows. Betty in many ways had only the clean white knowledge of a child. She possessed no key to the solution of difficulties that may be met with in any life. And before her lay the great adventure of womanhood.

CHANGES

Peter Carmichael knew that she would have to meet that adventure alone. He was outside her world—outside the bright young life that sometimes danced, sometimes walked staidly at his side. How could he be sure that her young feet would carry her safely through the intricacies and maze of life? Would she turn to him for help? There was the gap of years between them. Could he be certain that their hands would meet across that gap?

Amidst his varied interests and occupations, this doubt with its persistency would come into Peter Carmichael's mind, and it must be owned that it was as a jarring note in the harmony of his life. Doubt of Betty, doubt of any kind wherein his own honour would have been concerned, never entered his thoughts. It was only of her and for her, he felt. The entanglements of life are so many and so varied, and in the eyes of youth, with only its inexperience to act as guide, are difficult.

Peter Carmichael was coming up the avenue at Long Ashes. The clock in the stable-yard was chiming six, and he hastened his steps, remembering that he had promised Saxby that he would look at the decorated rooms for this, Betty's birthday party.

He found the drawing-room devoid of furniture, with a floor that had been miraculously polished, and with wreaths of flowers hanging from ceiling to walls. The second room leading out of it, known as the small drawing-room, was

a bower of palms and flowers. Beyond this was a corridor with an entrance leading into the conservatory. It was here that Saxby, earlier in the day, had complained to him of the shortage of Chinese lanterns; while being sufficient, as he considered, for general lighting purposes, they were not numerous enough to be decorative.

The tour of inspection over, he went to his "den," the room set apart for his own use, half smoking-room, half office, in which he saw his tenants. Closing the door, he had that peculiar sense of aloofness that comes when the door of a room set apart for oneself is shut, the sense of aloofness being so great that the door might almost be bolted and barred upon the whole world.

He dropped into the wide, deep chair which stood near his desk, and with a sigh prepared to light his pipe. Half an hour, at any rate, he must have before going up to dress

And soon he fell asleep.

CHAPTER V

BETTY DANCES

THE early dinner had not yet been served, and Betty sat quietly in the armchair in her bedroom.

Facial muscles betray physical fatigue, but in Betty's case it was not so much fatigue of the body as the nagging fatigue of having done something of which one repents. She could have cried at the recollection of having cooeed to Captain Lamley with the set hope and intention of bringing him to play tennis with her. Why did she do it? And what would she do that night if he told her he had heard her? She felt sick at the thought. She must never do such a thing again. How horrid to do things in one's life that one can never undo. Perhaps it would be best to ask Captain Lamley if he had heard her, and if he had, to ask him to forgive her. She wished she could wipe it all out! She wished she could stop thinking about it. She would never give her cooe again as long as she lived—never. She had been taught a lesson. It was beastly this thinking about that silly call for Captain Lamley.

But the mood into which she had fallen must

be overcome, and Betty, rising from the arm-chair, stood for a few moments in front of a long mirror at the end of her bedroom.

The slender figure dressed in a delicate fabric of white lace, the golden brown hair, the pearls round her neck, the slim ankles with the sheen of white silk, and the shoe buckles that glittered, made an arresting picture.

Betty stood and surveyed it. For some minutes she continued to look critically at herself, her expression absorbed.

Let no one think that a woman, if beautiful, takes no pleasure in looking at herself, for if they do they make a mistake. Loveliness, whether it be of landscape or of the human form, not only attracts but holds the attention. And when loveliness is possessed by the beholder herself, something beyond admiration is felt. The word vanity does not fit the case, it is rather the pride of possession, a kind of exultation, something to be hugged and prized.

So it was that Betty, as she stood in front of the mirror, said very softly to herself.

"It is lovely to be beautiful. I am glad. It makes my heart merry."

Suddenly she flung her slender arms, bare to the shoulder, above her head. "I will dance to myself—I love to see myself dancing." And suiting the action to the words, she swayed backwards and forwards, her delicate limbs full of grace, the white lace of her dress floating round her, now rising and falling as a mist.

As a little child she had been wont to caper

about under the Australian sun, her steps gradually assuming rhythmical measure "This is my butterfly dance," she would cry to her mother. "See me fluttering!" And with a handkerchief in each hand she pirouetted round and round to the accompaniment of her mother's singing.

And as the years passed she had invented more and more dances, the governess at her school playing minuets, sarabands, waltzs, anything that struck the child's fancy as suitable for her inventive powers. "Give me something slow," she would cry. "I want to do something like what all the ladies are doing in the picture that hangs in the drawing-room."

And daintily the little child pointed her toe, the small limb outstretched, and with head coquettishly set on one side, she did slow, graceful turns of the little outstretched limb, followed by a deep curtsy.

"That is very pretty," the governess would say.

"No. I do not think so. My legs and my arms were not going like music."

"What do you mean, Betty?"

"Sweet like music. Like birds when they are flying. You know what I mean."

"No, Betty. When you talk about your dancing, I think you must be dreaming."

"That is what I mean. When I dance, I hear lovely things, and I see stars and sunbeams all floating about."

And the love and power of inventing dances

had grown with Betty; so standing that day, dressed in readiness for the birthday party, she began dancing a minuet of her own invention, and which she called "*L'amour*."

And the vision she saw reflected in the large mirror evoked her admiration. Every movement was slow and graceful, every line in its constant change gave delight to her quickened sense of form.

"I think it is nearly perfect," she said to herself. "Only once did my right arm move by the space of a few seconds too slowly. I will make a note of that, so that when I dance '*L'amour*' for Peter, I can tell him it is the very best thing I have ever done."

Looking away suddenly from the reflection that was holding her attention, she saw, standing beyond her, and framed within the doorway of his dressing-room, the figure of her husband.

"Peter!"

Her cheeks were slightly flushed, her eyes were bright, and if her breathing was somewhat quickened, it was from the excitement of the dance rather than fatigue.

He smiled at her. He had been standing in the doorway for a few minutes.

"Don't tire yourself for to-night," he said.

"I'm all right, the dancing has refreshed me. I was worried."

"Worried!"

"Yes, worried. I am so annoyed with myself for having given my cooees."

"Probably I was the only person who heard it."

"But if Captain Lamley heard he would know it was I who had done it."

"What if he did?"

"It is just this, Peter—that it is very horrid we cannot go back and undo things we have done."

"If we have done a wrong thing, then it certainly is. For if you throw a stone into a pond, the ripples do not cease till they reach the bank. So if we do a wrong act, its effects go on till they reach the shores of eternity."

She looked startled.

"If that is true," she said, "we should be taught it while we are very young."

"Would the young believe it, Betty?"

CHAPTER VI

THE DANCE

THE clock which stood on the mantelpiece in the small drawing-room sounded its half-past nine Westminster chime, and Betty Carmichael, standing near it welcoming her guests, smiled, looking round at it, in response to apologies made by several guests for their early arrival.

"I am all the more pleased," she said, "that you have come early," giving a handshake here, a smile there, to a group of young girls who, with their attendant brothers and cousins, were all talking excitedly together. "No need to apologize—I am longing to dance myself, but I cannot till our last guest comes."

"What crowds of flowers!" "Roses galore."
"How perfectly lovely!" said several voices.

The guests were entering quickly, and the air was full of the sounds of laughter, with the hum of girls' high-pitched voices and men's deeper tones. The room had already threatened to be hot, and the blinds were drawn up and the casements thrown open. Moonlight streamed in—its brilliance being dimmed by the light of the electric burners. Roses were everywhere. Garlands were slung from electric burner to

burner. A *portière*, formed of roses, hung over the door which opened on to the terrace. The mirror above the mantelpiece, and the large one that occupied almost the whole of the wall space at the end of the room—relics of the early-Victorian age when Miss Belinda and Miss Betsy Ann, corseted and tight-laced, welcomed their guests—reflected the lights and the flowers.

A woman's high drawl rose above the hum of voices: "I have never seen anything so perfectly intriguingly lovely." It was Mrs le Jarbey, wife of a retired major, who, taking her husband's arm, pushed her way towards their hostess. He was a tall man of military carriage with a monocle, and was secretly observing faces rather than roses.

"Which way are you going?" he asked testily "You are going away from Mrs. Carmichael instead of to her."

"I want to intercept Hugh Lamley."

"Do let that poor beggar alone."

"I want to dance with him "

"Surely that rotten stuff of being in love with him when we were in India three years ago has come to an end! "

"My *affaire de cœur*? " she drawled.

"Running after a lad like him—you're twenty years older! "

"Not quite, Malcolm—ten to be exact."

"Well, ten years. He used to do his best to shuffle you off "

"He was safe with me."

"That's true enough," returned the husband

with a slight sneer. "But you preferred— Good evening, Mrs. Carmichael." He bowed with old-fashioned courtesy over the hand held out to him.

Here strains of dance music came from the hall, and the crowd swayed and turned, making its way to the large drawing-room, the babel of voices somewhat lowered in the efforts to get near the desired partners and farther away from those less desirable.

Soon the floor was covered with couples, retreating, turning, gliding, a mass of delicate colouring, the soft swish of feet mingling with the music.

Betty, smiling, radiant, nodded to her husband as she passed him in this her first dance. He stood with a small group of non-dancing men near the doorway.

Mrs. le Jarbey and her husband joined this group.

"Not dancing, Mrs. le Jarbey?" asked Carmichael.

She smiled languidly. "Not just at present I shall later."

Tall and of rather fine presence, Mrs. le Jarbey knew how to make the most of her looks. Her dark eyes, she was fully aware, could still be used effectively. Her fine shoulders as yet showed no signs of time, while her throat was round and beautiful, a rare thing even in the most carefully massaged woman. She held herself well, and her head conveyed the impression of self-assertiveness.

Mrs. le Jarbey had never been considered specially beautiful, but her will-power was great, and men had succumbed to it. It was because of this will-power that as a subaltern Hugh Lamley had been ensnared by her; petted and trained to fetch and carry, buy flowers to match her dress, ride out with her before the heat of India came on, dance with her or sit out as was her mood.

He was her recognized cavalier. The Colonel's wife, inwardly a little jealous of the Major's wife securing the handsomest of the subalterns for her lackey, would expostulate with her for making Hugh Lamley into what she was pleased to term "her pet cat." And Mrs. le Jarbey would reply in effect that no harm was done, as he was not in the least bit in love with her, and that it was but a very little *affaire de cœur* which served to amuse them both.

But this was only in part true. Certainly in the early days Hugh Lamley had been flattered by the obvious liking which Mrs. le Jarbey had shown for him. For undoubtedly she made a fine figure on horseback, and her riding was all it should be. And in the ballroom she could easily hold her own. But there were sometimes young and pretty girls with whom he would have liked to dance, and he began to resent the restraining glances given him by Mrs. le Jarbey. Also buying flowers too often became a tiresome drain upon his purse; in fact there were many things that held him in Mrs. le Jarbey's entourage from which he would like to escape.

But Mrs. le Jarbey, with that astuteness sometimes possessed by a woman a few years older than her *cavaliere servante*, had many little tricks and devices by which she rendered his escape impossible. She had tears, reproaches, jesting words at her command, each in its way potent, but none of a nature to offend. To offend him, to wound his *amour propre*, was never a weapon to be used. To have done so would have been to be defeated, and this could not be borne, for Mrs le Jarbey had fallen in love with Hugh Lamley. She had begun what she was pleased to call her little *affaire de cœur* as an amusement for herself, excusing the selfishness of it by saying it would be good for the young soldier to have this protection against the machinations of other women.

But it came to pass as time went on, though Mrs le Jarbey had carefully hidden it, that no matter what the young subaltern's feelings for her might be, she had been maladroit enough to fall deeply in love with him, and would have considered the world well lost for him had he so desired it. But Hugh Lamley did not so desire it—in fact if she extorted much service from him, he gave it, being a little flattered at being singled out from other young men, but he never lost his head over her, to say nothing of his heart which had ever been in safe keeping. So when Major le Jarbey's father died suddenly, and in consequence his son had to retire from the Army, returning to England to take possession of the family estate, Hugh Lamley wel-

came the release which came to him. Promises to write had been given on both sides, but in Lamley's case the letters became shorter and written at greater intervals until they ceased. He was too busy to write, he said.

CHAPTER VII

MRS. LE JARBAY

MRS. LE JARBAY stood watching the swaying, glittering crowd, her features carefully set to express pleasant attention. Inwardly there was soreness and pangs of fear, for dance after dance was begun and ended, and Hugh Lamley had either not noted her presence, or seeing her, was ignoring it, and jealousy deep red and shot with darts of zigzag blackness held her.

Here young Philip Cummersley asked her if she would dance "this rather jolly foxtrot" with him—"The eyes that gleam for you alone."

She, gracious, languid and smiling, consented, and they passed into the crowd.

Betty, pausing near her husband, was saying:

"Peter, if you and I did everything correctly, we should be waltzing together."

He laughed, his eyes on her face as he silently appraised its loveliness.

"I only wish I could. Here's Lamley. He'll make a better partner."

At that moment Captain Lamley came up to Betty, reminding her of the dance she had promised him.

"That's right, Lamley. I'm no dancer——"

"My husband is a beautiful dancer," interrupted Betty. "We waltz to the gramophone when we're alone. Peter has taught me the *trois temps* that he learned at school, and another his mother used to dance—the German Waltz—perfectly lovely."

So with her rippling, musical laugh, and a parting smile to her husband, she laid her hand on Lamley's shoulder and drifted away among the dancers.

Carmichael drew back, his attention upon the swaying, gliding figures. The music jarred upon him as a succession of weird, barbaric noises. It was different from the music to which he had danced in his youth—*The Blue Danube*, *The Kellogg Waltz*—dreamy and seductive. Why was this reaction? Why give up that which was melodious for the noise and vulgarity which point to an uncivilized state?

His eyes sought out the figure of his wife. She and Hugh Lamley were well matched, he thought. They were the right height, he about half a head taller than she. And both were lightly made and moved with the same perfection of rhythm. Yes, they certainly were the best dancers in the room. And now they were going into the palm house. They would find it cooler there. He was glad he had thought of having the palm house hung with Chinese lanterns. The subdued light of the lanterns would be refreshing after the electric burners. And that was Mrs. le Jarbey who was follow-

ing them into the palm house with young Philip Cummersley.

"Mrs. le Jarbey," mused Peter Carmichael.

He had asked Betty not to invite her for this dance, for he did not like her, but when Betty reminded him of the grievance of the pheasants he gave way.

The Long Ashes pheasant preserves ran side by side with Major le Jarbey's, and so a persistent feud existed between the respective keepers, aided and abetted by the Major, while it was ever Carmichael's endeavour to avoid grounds of complaint. So Major and Mrs. le Jarbey received an invitation.

That Mrs. le Jarbey had her own special grievance against Betty that evening, Carmichael could not know. Nor did he ever know that Mrs. le Jarbey, meeting and passing Betty and Hugh Lamley just within the entrance of the palm house, had looked over her shoulder at Betty, and said in her low, drawling tones, with her eyes veiled by her heavy lids and her lips smiling: "Quite right, Betty dear 'Gather ye roses while ye may, old time is still a-flying' Believe me, that is the true philosophy of life." After which she bore away, a tall, attractive and commanding figure

Betty looked inquiringly at her partner

"What did she mean?" she asked.

"Difficult to say"

But the speaker had flushed slightly. He understood perfectly Mrs. le Jarbey's gibe. Then he added:

MRS. LE JARBAY.

"I think perhaps she is a little jealous."

"Of our roses?"

"No, no!"

Betty began to laugh.

"I've never been jealous," she said.

"Perhaps not. You possess everything, so you have no cause for jealousy."

They had paused under the shade of a tall palm, the lantern suspended near it throwing its light full on Betty's face. Her eyes were bright and questioning, her lips parted in a smile.

"You puzzle me," she said.

Here her mood changed to sudden gravity. It was in these sudden changes of mood that Betty was specially attractive. It had once been said: "To see her in these quick changes of mood and she is irresistible."

A man cannot always be expected to have his castle guarded. The drawbridge and the postern gate may be faithfully kept by men-at-arms, while unknown to the knight a very small loophole gives entrance to an arrow that strikes home.

So with Hugh Lamley. He hesitated for one moment, then in a tone meant to be disinterested, he said:

"Mrs. le Jarbey is jealous of you. She wants what you do not value—and, thank God, what you do not wish to have. If you did——"

He broke off abruptly, and gave a short and bitter laugh as a man will who finds himself on

the edge of a moral precipice, to begin again as suddenly:

"I am talking nonsense Excuse me, Mrs. Carmichael. Dancing with me is like wine It goes to my head. And—and to dance with you is the wine of life."

In spite of himself the last words were spoken with passionate force. He had slipped over the edge of the precipice He knew it He knew now that he loved this girl who was sauntering slowly at his side down the palm house He thrilled to the sense of her nearness to him

"Let us go back to the dancing," Betty said quietly, and turning, led the way to the ballroom, but with the same sauntering step.

Hugh Lamley, his brain aflame, followed her closely. Was she innocent? Was she using her loveliness in such a way as to make her a temptress such as no man could withstand? Was Mrs. le Jarbey—handsome in a mature way, and full of lures and charms that were capable of causing a man to lose his balance—in a sense less dangerous than Betty Carmichael?

At the entrance to the ballroom Betty turned to him.

"I am afraid Mrs le Jarbey is not getting much dancing I have seen her standing out a good deal. Would you mind dancing with her? It would be kind"

"Certainly, if you wish it I have danced once with her."

"But again, if you don't mind"

"If you wish it, of course I shall be glad." He knew there was a ring in his voice which ought not to be there. But he had lost his bearings.

"Oh, it is too late now!" exclaimed Betty, as she saw the servants at the end of the ballroom drawing back the curtains leading to the dining-room. "That means supper."

"May I have the pleasure of taking you in?" asked Lamley.

"I should have loved it, but Major le Jarbey asked me if I would go in with him."

"Then may I have the dance after supper?"

"That, too, I have promised to Major le Jarbey."

"The one after that?"

"Yes, I shall love it. Our steps fit each other's so well, don't they?"

The wine of dancing, the wine of life, the wine of love are potent, and Hugh Lamley could not steady himself as he could have wished. He knitted his brows, and his lips closed firmly as—Major le Jarbey coming up to claim Betty's hand—he bowed to his hostess and turned away.

Later he sought out Mrs. le Jarbey and led her into the supper-room, where the scent of flowers, the bouquet of wine, the lights from the shaded electric lamps, and the babel of voices and laughter meeting Hugh Lamley, he gave himself up to their narcotic power.

"You are absent-minded to-night, Hugh," remarked Mrs. le Jarbey petulantly, so far as

the drawling tone so assiduously cultivated would allow.

"Am I? I do repent me" He was smiling as he turned his face towards her.

Mrs. le Jarbey noted the smile and thrilled to it, not knowing that his smile had been for his sister Gwen.

"Hugh, why have you not come to see me after that first call of yours?"

"I really have been very much occupied—the War Office—and many other things." He eased his collar with one finger, mindful of his tie.

"I have been longing for a *tête-à-tête* with you."

"That is very nice of you, Mrs le Jarbey"

His manner had its old urbane courtesy, but she was sensible of a little formality in it. This, however, she was too astute to notice, and gave a little contented laugh.

"Do tell me, Hugh, that you are glad to see me," she said.

"Of course I am glad. Why doubt it?"

"Can any of us say why we smile or sigh? I do not know why I doubted it"

"Then I will assure you that naturally I am glad to see you, Mrs le Jarbey. You were very kind to me when I joined the regiment, a shy subaltern"

"You filled a vacancy in my life, Hugh"

"You were socially much occupied"

Lamley's manner had stiffened, and Mrs le Jarbey saw her mistake.

"I am old-fashioned, you see, Hugh, so am inclined to be sentimental. Talk to me about India. Do you still ride out in the early mornings?"

"Ride out?"

"You remember the rides we used to have together?"

Lamley feigned forgetfulness, and arranged the knives and forks beside him, looking at them thoughtfully.

"You do remember them, Hugh?"

"Oh, yes—I think I do. Not very distinctly, still—I remember the heat"

He smoothed out the knives and forks. Then as if noticing suddenly that her wineglass was empty, asked her what wine she would drink.

She named a wine, then laid a hand lightly on one of Lamley's as it rested for a moment on the table beside her.

"Memory ever remembers," she said slowly, as if for him alone, and her contralto voice was charged with emotion.

No change of expression came into the young man's face as he looked at his companion. His manner was courteous, but he had drawn himself up and slightly away from her.

She saw what he desired her to understand. She saw that she no longer had any hold over him. She knew it as surely as if he had put it into words; and being so certain she struck out wildly, if by chance she could get some shadow of it back.

"Tell me, Hugh, did you love me in the old

days? Or did all those tender words, those glances, those kind acts mean nothing? Answer me, Hugh." And she took away the hand which still rested lightly on his.

"I was grateful to you, Mrs. le Jarbey, as I am still, for your kindness to me when I first went out to India. I did not know the ropes, and you helped me over difficult places. I assure you, Mrs le Jarbey——"

"You called me Ruby in the old days when we were alone, and we are practically alone in this large and crowded room—the voices, the rattle of glasses——"

"If I ever called you by your Christian name, it was presumptuous of me."

"I gave you leave, and I loved to hear it. Do you want me to believe, Hugh, that I was nothing to you? Tell me."

"You were something to me certainly. I have spoken of your kindness, and I beg you to believe that I was, and still am, grateful to you."

Mrs. le Jarbey made no reply, only looked at him with an expression of pain. And Lamley continued:

"I esteemed you and had the kind of affection a young man can have for a woman who shows him kindness and who is older than himself."

Then after a full minute he said hesitatingly, while he lowered his voice until it seemed to her as if it almost held a caress:

"I never loved you, Ruby. If you will look

back you will say I never so much as kissed your hand—have never said one single word that could be construed into an admission of love."

"I thought you loved me, Hugh."

Lamley made a still longer pause before he made any reply to her, then he said:

"You were a woman of considerable charm. You were an astute woman of the world. I was a callow lad; ignorant and flattered by your attentions. Often I tried to break away from you—I ask you to forgive me now for what I am going to say." He paused, then said: "On you lies the blame, if blame exists."

"You forget, Hugh, in such a close intimacy as ours—even in love the most platonic—the woman suffers. And I suffered and do suffer."

Neither spoke for a full minute, while she watched her companion's face closely.

Lamley's head was drooping, and his attention was seemingly given to the champagne glass, the stem of which he was slowly turning. Then he lifted it to his lips and took a quick gulp, afterwards setting the glass down with ostensible care, and squaring himself a little towards his companion, and speaking with studied gentleness, he said:

"I am ready to cry *peccavi*, Mrs. le Jarbey, if that will do anything towards undoing any wrong of which I may have been guilty. I was a very young man—will you not forgive me?"

"You hurt me, Hugh," she exclaimed.

"I do not mean to hurt you."

She felt humiliated. She had admitted that she had loved him and still loved him. She was filled with rage against herself. Then after the manner of one who wishes to make a successful retreat, she laughed, saying as lightly as might be:

"I suppose you wish me to understand that the roses we gathered in India are faded? If so, I am in full agreement. Men and women alike have their day. And flirtations are as tinsel when looked at in the dawn—rather meretricious. So now, Hugh, will you dance the first dance with me? No one dances like you."

"You do me honour." He smiled and bowed.

"I shall be delighted."

"That's all right then."

And with the ease of an accomplished woman of the world she at once steered the conversation into impersonal channels, gliding along as smoothly as though reefs and rocks did not exist.

"Will it not be as well, Hugh, if we make our way into the ballroom?" she said. "Oh, you are not finished. Sorry. But I see Betty Carmichael has already gone in that direction with le Jarbey. Beautiful girl, isn't she? Long Ashes makes a good setting for her, don't you think?"

Mrs. le Jarbey had risen from her chair, standing erect, her head held in queenly fashion. Then turning her face slowly towards her companion, she scrutinized his with eyes half veiled.

But if she expected to read anything there, she was foiled.

Slowly she sauntered out with Lamley.

"Do you know much of the Carmichaels?" she asked.

He was on his guard.

"No. Gwen and I play tennis here sometimes, that is all."

"Mrs. Carmichael is very attractive."

He wished to show complete indifference and therefore a little over-acted the part.

Mrs. le Jarbey gave a slightly cynical smile, and as they were now on the fringe of the dancers, she signed to Hugh Lamley that she was ready, and with a hand laid lightly on his shoulder, her ear set to the lilt of the music, she fitted her steps to his and moved away, a stately figure.

Peter Carmichael was watching his wife and Major le Jarbey as they passed in and out among the dancers, the placidity of his face lighted up with a half smile. The scene amused him in an impersonal way. He felt as one who looks down into an arena and sees nothing but the play-acting of children. He was outside it all. A strong, vital throb of interest touching him only when the girlish figure of his wife came within his range of vision.

Once she and her partner paused for a minute near him, and he heard le Jarbey saying to her:

"It's really awfully good of you dancing with me—really most awfully. I—I—really I am not able to express my thanks."

His manner suggested too great an appreciation of champagne during the supper. He certainly was much elated, but it must be noted that he had secured the most beautiful girl in the room for a partner.

"You see," he continued, "Ruby—that's my wife, you know—says I'm no good at dancing. Bad timest, and all that. She's dancing at the present time with Hugh Lamley. He was my wife's pet poodle when we were in India. My wife is like that. She likes to have a man at her beck and call. And it saves me a lot of trouble. She's a clever woman in her way. And good looking, too. But she's gone off a bit, of course. Are you ready? Rested? That's it—one—two—three."

He passed one arm round Betty and entered the maze again of slowly moving figures, his height of six feet enabling him to steer his partner cleverly towards the clearest spaces on the floor.

And Betty was wondering meanwhile what he meant by saying Captain Lamley was his wife's pet poodle in India.

An elbow came suddenly into her shoulder, and le Jarbey said angrily:

"By Jove, Ruby, your elbow can be a deadly weapon."

There was a half pause—a separating of the several entangled couples—apologies on the part of Lamley and inquiries as to Mrs Carmichael's shoulder, and then the dancers moved away and the maze of colour swayed on.

"Was that cricket, Mrs. le Jarbey?" asked Hugh Lamley. There was anger in his tone.

"She annoys me."

"We men—some of us, at any rate, try to play the game."

"Yes, your grandfather would. Possibly your father. And you, too, like a fool, in India. But that sort of thing is out of date. To be moral, as it used to be called, is a thing laughed at nowadays."

CHAPTER VIII

MAJOR LE JARBEY

BETTY'S dance with the Major was ended, and he, unwilling to relinquish his partner, suggested an ice, a little fruit, or a saunter in the garden, where dancers were strolling in the moonlight. Or if none of these—what would please her?

"I would like to go into the palm house. I have only just been within the doorway. But lots of people were inside, and it seemed inviting—nice and cool. We have had a block of ice put at the end. And as the lanterns were my idea, I should like really to see how they look."

"So the scheme of the decorations was yours? Very lovely."

"Not the whole scheme. I would be no good at it. There is only one thing I can do well—two things, perhaps—dancing and riding."

"By Jove, you certainly know how to dance."

"And I can ride. I was brought up on a farm in Australia, off and on, until I was sixteen."

"Do you ride much?" he continued in his ponderous style.

"When I am not playing tennis I ride a little. My husband does not like me riding alone."

And I do so dislike the groom riding after me. I am not used to it. In Australia I could ride on a man's saddle—or barebacked. I could ride in any way, but"—here she broke into her rippling, musical laugh—"never with a groom riding after me."

This brought a sidelong glance at her from the Major as an idea flashed into his mind. And trying to speak without undue emphasis, he said:

"But you would accept an escort, would you not?"

The conservatory door was partly closed, and he, taking a step forward, pushed it open for her.

"Cooler here," she exclaimed. "Isn't it pleasant?"

"Yes, perfectly rippin'. Nice air—smell of plants. But—er—what about your ridin'?"

"I don't trouble about it." She shot a momentary look of astonishment at him. "My husband sometimes, when I beg him very much, lets me ride out alone."

"Not very safe," he interjected, fixing his monocle more firmly.

"And then"—here Betty's eyes danced with mirth—"I go off on my own to the other side of the common, where there is a stretch of a couple of miles, and I give the mare her head and we go like the wind. Perfectly glorious. I really do get a gallop then. You see, my husband is rather handicapped with a rheumatic knee. So when he is away and I have coaxed

him to let me go out alone, I have the time of my life."

"But *surely*—er——"

She laughed. "You need not say *surely*. I have only one regret, and that is my husband will not let me hunt. I know I should lead the field."

"I want to speak to you about these solitary rides. I have given up hunting—too heavy. But—er—would you not accept——"

She saw that he was going to suggest his being her escort, and wished to nip such a suggestion in the bud. For one thing she disliked him—why, she could not have said, but foremost in her mind was the recollection that her husband had always said their acquaintance must be kept on a sound basis; there were the pheasants to be considered. So Betty was guarded in her reply

"I could quite easily find someone who would ride with me, I think. Thanks ever so much Captain Lamley comes to help me with my tennis—you see, I have entered for the Tournament—and it is just possible he would ride with me if I asked him."

This elderly squire of dames bristled up a little. In his dance with Betty everything had gone smoothly, and so with his suggestion to take this stroll together, therefore he was inclined to resent the intrusion of Lamley's name.

"So you would accept Lamley as an escort," he remarked with some asperity, "but not me."

"It is really most awfully kind of you, Major, and I thank you sincerely. But the whole truth is that I love to ride alone sometimes. Then I go across country, hedges and ditches. Peter's farmers all know me and wave their hats or hands to me. It isn't as if I were following the hounds—only my own sweet will."

"I bow to your sweet will." And quite without warning he touched her hair, which under the direct light of a Chinese lantern was shining like burnished gold.

The touch of his fingers was so light as to be scarcely perceptible; in fact a second or two later she wondered if it had really been. Still, she drew a little away from him, noting with satisfaction there were other people in the palm house whose voices could be distinctly heard by her, but they were near the entrance and behind a tall group of palms. She made as if to retrace her steps.

"Won't you go to see the block of ice at the end of the conservatory?" He motioned in that direction with his head. "It is really wonderful."

"I can quite imagine what it looks like. It was I who asked Saxby—our gardener, you know—to put it there."

"I should have known who suggested it without being told."

She brushed the compliment aside.

"Saxby said it would be bad for some of the palms."

"It may not agree with the palms, but it is

charming in itself. Full of poetry. It reminds me of—er—I hardly know—romantic things—evenings in Venice—in the early summer. Or Lake Como Do you know Villa d'Este and its gardens? Things that make you feel—er—I hardly dare express it——”

If he had been worsted in his attempts to get his beautiful young hostess to accept him as her riding escort, yet she had not resented that slight flick he had given to her hair. He grew bolder.

“Do you know that you are exceptionally beautiful?” he ventured.

She flashed a look of astonishment at him.

“Please do not be ridiculous! I do not like things of that kind said to me.”

“Forgive me. I thought we were getting on so well——”

“You thought *what*?” she snapped at him.

“Getting on so well”

“You are making a great mistake.” Here she remembered the pheasants. “We wish to be friendly with you and Mrs le Jarbey. We are neighbours, and we wish to be on good terms But I do not like compliments. They irritate me”

“Tell me that you are no longer angry with me, Mrs Carmichael.”

“Certainly not angry”——she carefully kept the pheasants in mind——“of course not I am not so easily offended So please say no more about it It is all right”

Here she assayed to pass him on her way to

the door leading from the conservatory into the house.

Quick as thought, he stooped and kissed her cheek.

She sprang away from him, erect, her eyes flashing, her lips curved in scorn, her hands clenched and held down at her sides.

"If I were a man I would knock you down," she cried. "Ever dare to do such a thing again and I'll——" The violence of her passion stopped her utterance.

He recoiled from her. The monocle fell from his eye. The suddenness and the unexpectedness of her bearing towards him made his brain reel. He struggled after self-possession. He jerked his head up, then with a catch in his breath he broke out hotly with the words:

"You little wildcat! You little she-devil!"

Her attitude, her expression remained unchanged. She breathed hard with parted lips, the double string of pearls round her throat rising and falling. She stood motionless, the embodiment of passionate indignation. At last she spoke, her tone low and each word spoken incisively.

"Remember this, Major le Jarbey, if ever I meet you when I am on horseback, I shall strike you across the face with my riding-whip."

He had recovered a little and spoke with more self-control

"You talk like a little fool. Do you think it good form to make such a fuss about a kiss? Because if you do, I don't. Let me tell you that

on various occasions I have kissed many a pretty girl, as pretty as any here to-night. And yet they never set up any nonsense."

"Let me pass," she said in commanding tone, for he was standing in the narrow path in front of the palms at the end of the conservatory, where it was not easy for two people to pass unless one made way for the other.

He felt for his monocle and put it with some vigour to his eye, and stared at her through it.

"No, my girl, you shall not pass unless you will give up that aggressive attitude. Ask any of the men here to-night if to kiss a girl is such a crime as you make out. Ask Lamley I bet he kissed my wife many a time when we were in India, and I bet she took it quietly enough like a sensible woman."

Betty tried to pass him, but he put out an arm and barred the way.

"The fact is," he continued with more self-control as he went on speaking, "you know so little of the world, so little of life, that you have no sense of values. The kiss I gave you was quite innocent. It had no meaning in it."

"It was an insult. And you had no right to kiss me."

"I allow that I had no right to kiss you, if it comes to that. The right belongs to your husband only. So come, Mrs Carmichael, do say you forgive me and make an end of it."

He was honestly desirous of propitiating her, for in her wildcat mood, as he regarded her

mental attitude, he feared her making a scene in the ballroom.

"I sincerely beg your pardon," he went on. "A man cannot do more than that. I swear to you I'll never sin again in the same way."

"Put your arm down, Major le Jarbey, and let me pass."

"My arm stays where it is, unless you say you will forgive me. Do you want me to go on my knees to you? It would make a pretty picture for anyone who came by chance down to this end of the conservatory, eh? Is that what you want?"

She spoke with hot indignation.

"I want nothing from you but that you should let me pass."

"Come, do be reasonable." He took out the monocle, carefully rubbing it on his sleeve. His anxiety to avoid anything like a scene had brought small beads of perspiration upon his face. "The fact is, Mrs. Carmichael, I have been drinking rather too freely of champagne, not to say of cocktails, and—er—you are damnably beautiful. You should bear that in mind. You can't expect—er—do for heaven's sake be a bit more broad-minded, or less innocent, or something, and be ready to forgive a man if he be guilty of so small a lapse as the giving of a kiss."

The force of her passion was expending itself. She had begun to tremble from head to foot. She was no less indignant, no less angry with him. But she was conscious that her powers of

resistance were weakening, and that a flood of tears after so brave a defence of what she held as her beliefs, would have the appearance of being worsted by this man. So she struggled for something like composure.

After a pause he spoke again :

"Is there to be no forgiveness, Mrs. Carmichael? Are you adamant? Am I to go under the threat of that cut across my face with your riding-whip? Come. I make my last appeal to you. Say you will forgive me?"

She looked up at him, and this time the tears would not be held back, but slowly welling trickled down her cheeks.

For the first time the man was genuinely contrite. He was no nearer understanding her mental attitude. Women of his acquaintance would have accepted his kiss quietly, or at most might have given his cheek a flick of her finger in pretended disapproval. But this outpour of passion—these tears!

Not bad at heart, not designedly an *intrigant*, simply an ordinary man, slightly daring, but ready to be checked, and if theoretically an immoral man, yet in actuality not to be classed as one, Major le Jarbey felt, as Betty spoke, somewhat as a naturalist feels when inadvertently he has injured a butterfly's wing. His ordinary attitude of mind recoiled from his own act. Here was a girl with whom purity was something objective; a thing to be guarded, fought for—perhaps in extreme cases to be died for. The type of girl was new to him. In those

few seconds he recognized her as upon a different plane from those with whom he had for the most part associated. He felt he had been brutal in giving her that kiss, innocent though it was in intent, and this he would have been ready to swear. Yet in her sight, in her own view, it had been an outrage, and therefore he had wronged her. For had he not brought her down from that high pedestal on which she mentally stood? Had he not wounded her, and so far had been unable to find balm for the wound? No matter of how little account that kiss had been in his sight; in hers it was impure and had in it the quality of destroying the perfection of the atmosphere in which she lived.

The tears in her eyes smote him with a stinging power that no lash across his face could have had. Mentally he cringed before her. He could have knelt and with bowed head have proclaimed his regret.

But all that he did, in fact, all that he could do, was to bow deeply and lower his arm for her to pass

Swiftly with her light step, fleetingly with her soft, cloud-like garments, she went to the door of the conservatory.

Lamley was on the point of entering and encountering her, said he was looking for her as it was their dance and the band had just begun to play an entrancing waltz.

He broke off, startled by the expression of her face.

"I want to see my husband. I want very

SHE WAS HIS WIFE

much to see him. I must see him." Her voice trembled.

"I heard him talking to Mrs. le Jarbey. See, he is over there. They were going to the card-room to play bridge. Shall I go and tell him you want to speak to him?"

"No, not here. It would not do."

CHAPTER IX

THE BOND

PETER CARMICHAEL passed within a few yards of Betty, but without seeing her, steering his way with Mrs. le Jarbey through the outer fringe of dancers. His head erect as was its wont, though a little turned towards Mrs. le Jarbey, an indulgent smile upon his face evidently in response to something she had said, his eyes wearing their accustomed tranquil expression.

Betty watched him as he passed, but he, not knowing of her proximity, did not turn to her. She had paused with Hugh Lamley near the band, and the sound of the music, added to the slithering of dancing feet, and that peculiar humming of many voices, punctuated occasionally with laughter and the high tones of girls' voices, made talking difficult.

"I must get away from this noise and glitter," exclaimed Betty hysterically.

Lamley, startled, looked at her and felt a little alarmed.

"What can I do for you?" he said.

"Nothing, thank you."

"I am afraid you are not well, Mrs. Carmichael. Is it the heat?"

Betty shook her head, turning a distressed face for a moment upon Lamley.

"I have been insulted," she said.

"Insulted!"

"I cannot talk here. Will you take me across the hall?"

She laid her hand on his arm and led the way to a side door that opened on the corridor leading to the smoking-room, which had been set apart for cards, and farther down, to her husband's "den." Then seeing Mrs. le Jarbey and her husband in front and going in the same direction, she said she wanted to go slower so that she might not overtake them.

As Mrs. le Jarbey passed out of the dimly lighted corridor into the doorway of the brightly lighted card-room, she paused, looking back, and on seeing who was behind her called.

"How can you two come away when such a seductive waltz is being played?"

Betty Carmichael did not catch what she said and merely waved her hand. But Captain Lamley did, and a look of displeasure came on his face.

To Carmichael Mrs. le Jarbey said:

"So charming to see your wife and Hugh Lamley dancing together. Quite intriguing, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes. Very good. They are well matched in height. And their stepping, or whatever you call it—I am no dancer myself—seems to fit

in." The expression of kindly interest on the speaker's face had been increased rather than lessened by Mrs. le Jarbey's remark.

"You are a very good-natured husband! May you get your reward." Mrs. le Jarbey laughed quite successfully.

The calm grey eyes were turned upon her in mute surprise, and he smiled as if her words had no special meaning for him.

"We all get our reward," he replied.

"Have you never sown wheat and found that tares have come up?"

"Quite probably, Mrs. le Jarbey. But I have had a good share of wheat in my life whether I deserved it or not. But here come our bridge partners. At which table would you like to sit?"

"At this one near the door. It will, I think, be cooler."

What Mrs. le Jarbey did not say was that by sitting near the door she could command a full view of the corridor, and so note the time her hostess and Captain Lamley were together. She would then smile at them and draw the husband's attention—very cleverly, of course—to the fact that his wife was still with the good-looking, well-set-up young soldier. This might start a fire, a small flame of jealousy in the husband's mind which would serve to raise a protest to Hugh Lamley's being too frequent a visitor at Long Ashes.

Her desire was that the fire should only be a small one. Something that smouldered rather

than blazed. A large fire would attract too much attention, and this would not serve her ends so well.

Seated at the card-table, she looked at Carmichael who was her partner. And as she watched him she doubted if he would be easy to influence. There was a suggestion of quiet strength in his face. Those blue-grey eyes with their gentle expression would not readily flame up with the emotions she desired to kindle. She watched his hands as they dealt out the cards. She admired them. They were deft in their movements, finely made, strong, not too white but browned as was his face with exposure to the sun. Definitely, she decided, he was good to look at, in a middle-aged way. Yes, he was handsome, rather in the French fashion of the last Napoleonic era, with his slightly greying moustache. And he held himself well. The set of his shoulders was good, and there was neither stooping nor droop of the head.

She doubted yet more whether she would be able to influence him in the direction she desired. To awaken this man's jealousy would be difficult, that she saw. He would have to recognize unmistakable signs of dishonourable conduct before he would ascribe wrongdoing to anyone. To do otherwise would be to dishonour himself.

Meanwhile Betty Carmichael had reached the farthest end of the corridor, and opening the door of her husband's room, turned on the

electric light and signed to Lamley to follow her.

It was a room lined with bookcases interspersed with old prints. Though large it was a room that suggested comfort with its well-padded couch, easy chairs, and roll-desk with revolving chair, though perhaps a little oppressive-looking with its heavily curtained windows.

As they went in a clock on the mantelpiece struck one.

Betty dropped into an armchair, Lamley standing motionless a little way from her, waiting for her to speak.

They were silent for a full minute. She was evidently trying to gain self-control; her hands laid on the arms of the chair were pressing them hard.

"Shall I leave you?" he asked.

"Please stay, if you don't mind."

"Are you sure you wish it?"

"Quite sure." Her voice was tremulous and she spoke with effort. "I only want time to collect myself. I don't want to cry. It is so silly. Don't you think it is?"

"It is natural sometimes."

Again the girl's strong young hands took a firm grip of the leather-covered arms of the chair.

Gradually she recovered a certain amount of self-control.

"I want to tell you about it," she said.

He stood looking at her.

"At first he talked about the decorations,"

she began. "Then about riding, and when he heard that my husband would occasionally allow me to ride alone, he offered to be my escort. I refused because there is no need for an escort. If it were really necessary there is the groom to ride out with me. And then—yes, I believe it was then that he put out a hand and touched my hair. At least I think he touched my hair, but if so it was such a light touch that I hardly felt it. However, I was frightened. Why, I don't know."

She paused, an expression of distress in her eyes.

"You see it was this way," she continued. "We were in the conservatory, and standing in the narrow path at the end of the conservatory where it is not easy for two people to pass. And I was wanting to make my way to the door leading from the conservatory into the house. So I tried to pass him, when like lightning he stooped and kissed me."

The man in Hugh Lamley sprang instantly to arms.

"Who was it?" he asked.

"Major le Jarbey."

"*Le Jarbey!*"

Lamley repeated the name after her, the tide of his passion rising. His one conscious effort being to keep away from her—that his arms should not reach out to her—that his lips should not seek hers. Then he heard her voice and it recalled him to realities. She was saying:

"I feel so insulted. But do you think I was to blame? He said I was."

"Not consciously to blame. If a woman is very beautiful——" But he broke off.

Betty glanced up at him again and noted the tightly compressed lips, the heightened colour.

"Have I vexed you?" she asked. "But I felt I must tell somebody. I shall tell Peter as soon as I can."

Lamley was struggling with mingled feelings of passionate resentment and jealousy against the man who had dared to kiss this girl whom, unfortunately, he loved, and he walked to the other end of the room and back before he could trust himself to speak. He then said:

"I think it would be a mistake to tell your husband. Please do weigh the consequences."

"But I want to tell Peter."

"It would compel your husband to ask Major le Jarbey to apologize. It would start a scandal. You are near neighbours. You could never again be on the same terms."

There was a tense minute of silence, broken by Hugh Lamley hesitatingly.

"How can I get you to understand certain things, Mrs Carmichael? When a woman is beautiful, her beauty is a great responsibility. Quite innocently she can wreck a man in more ways than one. And you——"

He was finding it difficult to say what he wished to say, but after a pause he picked up the broken thread and went on:

"It would be better, and perhaps kinder, if

you would try to think a little more leniently of Major le Jarbey. It was a most uncourteous act—use any word you like—I am not defending it. But there is something to be said in extenuation.”

Betty lifted her face to him with the troubled look of a child in distress.

Lamley turned away, walking to the other end of the room. He felt a sudden constriction of the throat, and after a long pause he turned back, seeing the situation was getting out of hand, and spoke hurriedly:

“It is too difficult, I cannot talk to you as if you were my sister. But I think I may say to you without offence that a beautiful woman in her innocence and ignorance, in her very purity may cause us men to transgress as le Jarbey has done to-night”

“But don’t you think Major le Jarbey’s behaviour was insulting?”

“It was damnable.”

“Then why am I to forgive him?”

“For heaven’s sake, Mrs Carmichael, forgive le Jarbey. A man can do no more than regret his behaviour. He cannot undo it, so I beg of you to grant him forgiveness”

She made no reply but kept her eyes fixed on Lamley’s face.

“I think, Mrs. Carmichael, if you will consider for a moment you will see you ought to shoulder some of the blame. It is not quite fair to the man. Forgive me, but I think you are too hard on him.”

His utterance had become thick, his love for this girl was threatening to betray him. But with an impatient cough he went on:

"We men are more or less on our guard with women who deliberately set out to wreck us. There are some, believe me, who would stake their souls to turn us into passionate devils. But alas! it is the good women who are as hidden rocks, and before we are aware we have been wrecked."

"I see what you mean," Betty said slowly in a low voice.

"Then please forgive him and keep silent."

"Silent?"

"Men have great contempt for the woman who tells."

Betty saw the flush on Lamley's face, the tense expression of his mouth and eyes, and shyly put out her hand for him to take.

"I will try to forgive him," she said.

Her voice was very low, and her eyes fell away from his. A few seconds passed and she was conscious of the hand which held hers, closing gently over it. She looked up at him and added:

"As you think it wiser, I will not tell Peter, though I like to tell Peter everything."

Her hand still lay in his, when very gently and reverently he touched it with his lips, letting it slip from his hold as gently.

She thrilled to the kiss. It seemed as a bond between them. And in her ignorance and innocence she rejoiced.

CHAPTER X

JAMES ASPENDALE

THE following evening—the evening after the dance at Long Ashes—Peter Carmichael went, as invited, to dine with his new tenant at The Grange.

James Aspendale, leaning back in a wicker chair, *The Times* in his hand, quietly reading, rose at once upon Carmichael being announced, holding out his hand and saying how very glad he was to see him. He smiled as he met his guest.

Aspendale was of medium height, and from his appearance it would have been impossible to associate either romance or tragedy with him. He was clean-shaved. His hair was grizzled and closely cropped. The colour of his face was healthy without being specially bronzed. A cloud, however, as of some mental trouble, was upon the dark, deeply set eyes.

Not in any way was he unusual looking, thought his guest, so far as outward appearances went.

But when Peter Carmichael sat down on the chair to which his host pointed, and the two

men had exchanged a few words, he became aware of a certain aloofness in Aspendale's manner, even though his handshake had been warm and he had spoken words of welcome.

"We are to be neighbours, Carmichael," he said stiffly, "and I hope friends."

"Thanks." The older man smiled, adding: "We country people are compelled either to be gregarious or hermits. And I belong to the gregarious set. I like human beings."

"Selected, of course. I take it you mean that?"

"Certainly." Carmichael laughed. "I don't feel inclined to hobnob with every Tom and Harry."

"You leave out the Jills." Aspendale's expression did not change as he smoothed his chin with the open palm of his hand.

"I admit they are a bit difficult," returned Carmichael. "They have so many facets."

His thoughts, curiously enough as it seemed to him, went back to Mrs. le Jarbey's manner the previous evening when they were playing bridge, and which he had not liked. And when Aspendale, in replying, had said it was their many facets which was a woman's greatest charm, he had replied evasively, his thoughts still on his partner at bridge. Then in order to switch his mind into a pleasanter channel he said:

"I never had a sister, and a man without a sister grows up one-sided, and so, unfortunately, with very little experience of women."

"You are right, I think, Carmichael. I have sometimes thought if I had had a sister, life for me might have been easier and different."

His guest nodded in acquiescence.

"Carmichael, I have had a bitter cup to drink. And sometimes I blame myself for the bitterness of it, while I go on draining it."

Here the butler opened the door and said that dinner was served.

As the two men crossed the narrow hall, Carmichael noticed that his companion halted a little in his walk, and that one shoulder drooped slightly. What he did not notice, and this was because of his indifference in the matter of dress, was the perfection of his host's clothes from collar to heel. Perfect everything was in outline and style. Why this was could have been explained by anyone who knew the secret of the man's life.

For the same reason, the dinner and service could not have displeased the most fastidious. The food, the wines, the coffee, the cigars were beyond reproach. Also the dinner was short.

The men talked but little so long as the grey-haired old butler was in the room, but coffee brought in, Aspendale started a subject that was evidently on his mind.

"The failure of that bank has been unfortunate for me," he said. "It has hit me rather badly."

"I was afraid from what I heard in Town," returned his guest sympathetically.

"Indeed, I may say it has hit me very

heavily. When I was young I wanted money—needed it badly. I was working for a purpose. Working to win my wife. Now I want it for a different object.”

“There are so many purposes, are there not?”

Carmichael squared himself in his chair the more easily to face his host.

“Yes. Some men work with a high ideal, some with a base motive.”

“I quite agree. Take the capitalist who helps millions not only to live, but to spend better, healthier, saner lives”

“That is the effect of what is accomplished by the workers. But was that the aim of the capitalist, to benefit humanity?”

“It might be.”

“Yes, might be, but was it?”

“A man has to live himself.”

Aspendale’s deeply set, dark eyes gleamed brightly, and he leaned forward, lifting the wine-glass with its untasted port out of the way while he tapped the table with his carefully manicured hand to emphasize his words. He said:

“No man makes a cart solely for the purpose of giving his neighbour’s children a ride. He makes the cart because of the pleasure which he derives from its making”

“But having the cart, it is then in his power to give the children a ride, and thus he probably does,” Carmichael laughed lightly.

“This is my point”—here his host became insistent—“the mere fact of making money

gives a certain satisfaction. And the possession is stimulating. One can invest. One watches the markets, foreign and home. One has the thrill of waiting for the critical moment when to buy, when to sell. It comes. One has made thousands."

Again Carmichael laughed lightly as he said: "Or lost thousands." He would not have his host think that he regarded what he was saying as anything beyond light after-dinner talk. So half-jokingly he added. "Then you are an advocate for gambling on the Stock Exchange?"

"And why not?" The speaker leant yet nearer to his guest in order the better to see his face.

Carmichael felt he was on awkward ground and waited, hoping Aspendale would reply to his own question.

And Aspendale did reply.

"I don't drink—you can see that for yourself." He pointed to the wineglass in front of him. "A man in my position will be driven either into drinking or gambling. The one ruins the body, and it may be that the other ruins his moral fibre. I do not know. It is not for me to say because I am a gambler."

The two men regarded each other silently. The dark, deep-set eyes of the one were steady, observant, endeavouring to read the thoughts that lay behind the calm, grave face of his guest. Finding that his guest made no reply, Aspendale continued:

"No criminal is condemned unheard, and if you knew the facts of my life you probably would not condemn this action of mine."

The grave face of the man opposite to him relaxed a little.

"Believe me, I am not condemning you. One often feels as John Bunyan did, 'But for the grace of God,' etc., etc."

"True!"

There was half a minute of rather awkward silence, and Carmichael, in order to get off the personal subject on to the more general one of the bank failure, spoke of himself

"The failure also affected me, but only slightly," he said "You will know that I am in business in the City—not in a very large way, perhaps, but enough to make it worth while to carry on, at any rate now that I am married"

Aspendale had lowered his eyes, and though he said something in response, the tone of his voice told that his mind was not on the subject

"Carmichael & Son," continued his guest "I am the third Carmichael. It was my grandfather who founded the business"

"Was it indeed?" was the absent response.

"Yes, and trade flourished with him as with my father, but in the past twenty years the turn over has been comparatively small."

A slight movement of the head was the only sign that his host heard, then quite suddenly Aspendale said:

"I want to speak to you about hunting. Shall we go into the garden? There are chairs

there, and I expect Pybus will have put cigars and drinks in readiness for us."

The chairs had been placed side by side in front of a simply constructed arbour, together with a table, glasses and various other things. And here the two men seated themselves.

The heat of the day was over, and the light from the setting sun caused long shadows to run from the trees and hedges in the valley. There was a stillness in the air which comes sometimes in a summer evening. Overhead crows were flying high and steadily homewards, an occasional cawing being the only sound to break the quietness of the evening.

"You think the hunting is bad," Aspendale was saying. "I am rather sorry for that."

"You can see for yourself"—Carmichael gave a comprehensive sweep of the hand over the far-lying landscape—"you have but to look at the boundary lines of the fields—hedges like those are not easy to negotiate. And then there is the hilly nature of the country. It makes hunting very heavy going. Still, as a younger man I have had some good runs and enjoyed them."

"Then you don't hunt now?" queried Aspendale.

"I have not hunted for some years. My wife would like to hunt, but I am not keen about it for her."

"Isn't she a good rider?"

"Oh, *rather*. Spent the early part of her life on an Australian farm."

There was a pause and a night insect swept close by the heads of the two men, with a loud whirring of its wings.

It was Aspendale who spoke first. He said: "My wife loved hunting."

Carmichael, a little startled and surprised at this mention of his wife by his host, for somehow he had got it into his head it was a forbidden subject, turned his eyes in the direction of the speaker.

Aspendale, leaning back in his chair, was making rings of tobacco smoke, and as the last one melted into thin air, he said without any trace of emotion:

"You see, it is this way. 'At any time—at any moment even, my wife may return to me. And for that reason I take care to have everything in readiness for her.'"

Aspendale rose from his chair and with bent head and slow, halting step went down the short path to the wicket gate that opened upon the public road. Here he stood, his arms folded and resting on the top bar of the gate.

For some minutes Aspendale stood thus silently, and Carmichael, beginning to feel that this curious action on the part of his host meant a signal of dismissal, was about to get up when Aspendale suddenly turned round and, seeing signs of his guest's imminent departure, laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"Please do not go yet," he said. "I want to speak to you."

CHAPTER XI

IN CONFIDENCE

"CARMICHAEL, I want to keep my wife's horse—a beautiful dark bay thoroughbred—until she comes back to me. I want stabling for three horses, my groom's, my wife's, and my own. At present they are stabled in the village inn, the Red Lion. Can you do anything for me?"

The two talked for some time over the advantages of stabling being near a house. After which followed the question whether the site of The Grange, built as it was with but little available ground, would lend itself to the addition of stables. Here the suggestion was made by Carmichael that perhaps the stabling at Long Ashes, with its row of untenanted stalls for some twelve horses, could be utilized; a suggestion that, however, was soon to be vetoed, for would not grooms get to squabbling over the hay, oats, brushes, etc., were the stables practically under one roof.

Here a remark made by Carmichael after a

long half-hour's discussion turned the conversation into another channel.

"You say you would be quite willing to put up stables and a groom's cottage near the village," repeated Aspendale, "were I certain to be here for several years. That is a question I am unable to answer."

There was silence for a full minute, and suddenly Aspendale flashed out words that but a short time before he would have said could not have been spoken by him. But there was something in the mien of this quiet, middle-aged man that told of a breadth of outlook, of the self-restraint from which is born patience, which broke down the barrier of reserve within which Aspendale had lived for several years.

"I loved my wife," he said, "more than anything or anyone on earth. And it is always a proof to me that there was love on her side, or why was she content to wait the three years while I worked to make some sort of a decent home for her. We married. It was six years before I saw anything was amiss. I do not blame her. He was a decent fellow—an awfully good fellow. He was good looking, too. Had great charm of manner; socially a great success. In short he had everything that I lacked. Was he to blame for loving her? How could he be blamed, she being what she is?"

The speaker paused, and hearing the low, long drawn-out sigh that was given as the only response that could be made, he went on:

"No passion of anger or of jealousy seized

me. I was crushed—crushed is the only word I can use. To understand all is to forgive all. And as I understood all—I forgave all. I sought for a divorce and got it, and when the year was up they married.”

The speaker leaned over the wicker table which stood between the two men, and laid his hand palm uppermost upon it. And Carmichael, noting it, put his own strong, brown hand upon the open palm of the hand which was white and delicate as a woman's, and firmly grasped it.

Neither man spoke. The tight grip, the firm hold was eloquent. The hand-clasp was as a spoken bond between them. When it was relaxed, Aspendale was the first to speak. His voice trembled and his deep-set, dark eyes seemed as if they strove to give strength to his words.

“Now that I have spoken and told you a little, I want to tell you more,” he said. “Will you listen?”

“I will listen.” A long, shivering sigh broke from the older man. “I will listen to anything you may wish to tell me.”

“I have no home.”

There was a tremor in the speaker's voice and hoarseness. He spoke with effort.

Carmichael bent a little more towards him. “Try to hear me out,” continued Aspendale, his eyes burning feverishly. “When they married our home went. I could not bear to live in it. I constantly heard a light footstep

in the hall or on the stairs; the quick drawing-back of the *portière* outside the drawing-room door, and I would start to my feet! Was it Katinka back again! But no, no, no—never was anyone there."

The speaker paused, breathing audibly through his nose as he strove to keep down his emotion. A long minute, and then he continued speaking:

"The house is in London. But in spite of the noise of the traffic—in spite of every outside sound at night—at night I could hear her breathing softly beside me. Sometimes I would hear her saying beneath her breath: 'Are you awake?' And I would tremblingly put out my hand towards the bed that stood within reach, my heart beating violently with the thought that possibly she had come back, and had crept noiselessly into bed in the darkness. But flashing on the electric burner, I saw only the vacant pillow—only emptiness. Well, this kind of thing went on night and day, day and night. So I left our home."

In the pause that followed Carmichael passed his hand with a harassed gesture down his face.

"Listen to me a little further, Carmichael. I could no longer live in that house. But everything stands just as she left it—only she is not there, and I am not there. Nothing is out of place. It is all ready for her if she returns. Every chair, every cushion, her books, every little scrap of her needlework—such marvellous

needlework; even I, a man, used to be lost in admiration of it—everything awaits her return."

Aspendale straightened himself in his chair as one who seeks relief from pain, but the pain was of the kind to which no movement brings relief.

"Why tell me all this?"

Carmichael's voice was low, and he spoke gently as we speak to one who is sick, leaning across the table and laying a hand lightly upon the other man's shoulder.

"I can see," he continued, "that it is causing you much pain. And to what end?"

The look which Aspendale gave, bright-eyed, with tightly closed lips, dumb as to speech yet eloquent, was the only answer. Then he smiled, and somehow the smile twisted his face grotesquely.

"If you had been silent," he said, "as I have been for four years—it is five years since she left me—you would know what it is to go about with your life one long-drawn-out agony, and with your lips closed so that no scrap of that agony could find an outlet. My God! to have to endure such agony—to know what it is to be built up, walled in within yourself, struggling to escape—is to know hell-fire. And now to find someone who will listen to me, and who is in sympathy with me! You understand what I mean, Carmichael?"

As a note on some musical instruments answers to the note of another, so the big

nature of the man to whom this outpour had been made, answered silently. He was not a man of eloquent speech. All he could do was tentatively to put out again one hand across the table and grasp firmly the hand hastily given him in response.

"I get relief in talking to you, Carmichael. May I go on?"

The reply was a firmer grasp upon Aspendale's hand.

To Carmichael it was as if he had been asked to look upon a scene of desolation where blinding fires had fallen and over which forked lightning was throwing its darts. And in this scene lay a human being, living, writhing, crushed. And the man's big heart and tender nature went out to Aspendale.

"I think you told me you had divorced your wife," he said gently.

"That is true. I loved her so deeply that I was ready to give her up—to die for her if need be. But that does not kill the hope I have right down in my heart. If she wearied of me, why may she not weary of him? And if she wearies of him, why may she not come back to me? This is why I work for money. This is why I gamble, trying to make money quickly. I am now rich—very rich as compared with what I was when we lived together. We had not too much money then. It is the hope of her returning that keeps me alive. That, and one other thing. Shall I tell you of that other thing?"

"If it will help you."

"Bend your head a little nearer, Carmichael. I am even afraid of the birds hearing. No—nearer still. And take my hand in yours in pledge that you will never betray my secret. There is something in your face that tells me you may be trusted. So here is my secret. I am kept in constant knowledge of her whereabouts. They travel. He is rich. They move about from place to place. And when I no longer can bear to live without a glimpse of her, I go in disguise and dogging her steps look at her, unrecognized, unknown and unsuspected."

"But how can you bear it?"

"Carmichael—Carmichael—what can a man not bear when he loves a woman as I love my wife? To see her walking, her head erect, her feet planted firmly as if she were a queen—and in my eyes she is a queen—is to renew my hope that some day she will come back. Talk about selling one's soul! I would gladly sell my soul if I could see her again as the mistress in our home. My soul! Of what value is it to me without her? Would it were possible to barter it! To have again some years of life with her—twenty, ten, nay, even five! My God! if such a market existed what a bartering there would be—for I am not the only man who would sell his soul for a woman. What a tumult! And then what a holocaust! What a burning of the souls of the damned!"

The speaker got up excitedly and walked a

few paces away, then swiftly turning round he exclaimed.

"I must get off this line of thought. People say I am mad And I shall go mad if I keep on it too long."

CHAPTER XII

THREATENING ELEMENTS

AN hour later the two men stood at the gateway opening upon the high road in front of The Grange.

"That is good of you, asking me to join you in a gallop to-morrow morning," Aspendale was saying. "At what time do you go?"

"I'll make my time fit yours"

"My man will be up with my horse from the stabling in the village at ten to-morrow morning sharp. How will that do? Or is it too early?"

"Very well. My usual time in the summer is seven o'clock. I like to get out before the freshness is off the morning."

"Good."

"Also an early hour suits me best when I am going up to Town. I usually go three times a week. But to-morrow I am quite free. Since I married I have taken in a partner."

"Right, then. I'll be at your lodge gates a few minutes after ten to-morrow."

"Good night, Aspendale."

"Good night. So long."

Carmichael, turning away, walked slowly up the hill in the direction of Long Ashes, his head drooping slightly, his mind deep in thought.

This tenant of his whom he had expected to find abnormal, had played the ordinary host well until the conversation had found its way to what was evidently the one absorbing thought of his life. Then it was that the strain of a consuming passion shook the man's whole physique which was weak in many ways, as was betrayed by the drooping shoulder and slight limp; and by the hands, slender enough for a woman's. Carmichael recalled the expression of the deep-set eyes that shone with a fierce unwavering light when he spoke of his wife. He remembered the nervous twitching of the hand that seemed as if it could not lie passive in the clasp of his own.

"Poor beggar!" and Carmichael gave again that shuddering sigh which had escaped his lips when he found himself being compelled to listen to the details of a tragedy.

Carmichael's depression increased and weighed upon him.

How was it that Aspendale had borne such agony as must have been his, in silence? How could that semi-cripple go about his daily work, and map out a new life for himself, adjusting his circumstances, and holding a tight rein upon his actions? How came it about that he had had the power to build a wall of hope, surrounding himself by it, and dwelling within it, so making his existence bearable?

A distant roll of thunder interrupted Carmichael's thoughts. And lifting his head he saw that the moon which had shone brightly when parting with his host at the wicket-gate, had passed behind a cloud, and the soft twilight of June had suddenly deepened while indistinct came the low murmur of thunder.

Carmichael looked at the horizon where lay a shallow bank of cloud, and noted the swift flashing of lightning as of the momentary opening of the door of a lighted room.

The air had become as a burden that laid heavy hands round and about him.

And his mind went to Betty with her youth and her beauty. He conjured up the flower-like face, he called to mind her gentleness, her playfulness, her kittenish, childlike gambols. And how she had made her presence felt at the dance the previous night. Then he saw her dancing with her fairy-like swiftness of step, and a buoyancy of motion denied to the other dancers.

His eyes on the path, he smiled in quiet satisfaction.

Again there was the distant muttering of thunder. Then brief silence. Then far away and remote a clashing of angry elements.

Carmichael looking at the distant horizon watched the opening of that mysterious doorway in the heavens through which came gleams of light.

Summer lightning, he said to himself. Not the forked, dangerous kind that deals disaster with swift, dagger-like blows.

He took off his hat, swinging it and keeping time with his steps. Three minutes more and he was through the lodge gate at Long Ashes.

But who was that taking the short cut he had forbidden being used, and had had railed off? He stopped, straining his eyes in the growing gloom, for the moon was still hidden.

Was it not Lamley and his sister? Yes, one had vaulted over the railing and was now assisting the other.

He would ask Lamley again if he would be good enough to come to Long Ashes by the public road and the lodge, as he was trying to stop the short cut from the village, tramps and other undesirables having begun to use it.

And here without any ostensible reason Mrs. le Jarbey came into his mind. What was it that she had either said or hinted at when they were playing cards?

He could not remember clearly. He did not like Mrs. le Jarbey—he had once caught her telling a lie. And he never could quite forget this.

CHAPTER XIII

HUSBAND AND WIFE

CARMICHAEL opened the front door with his latch-key, and the blaze of light in the hall momentarily confused him. Why were all the electric burners turned on?

At the farther end of the hall and near the gramophone, stood Betty, while a footman was collecting records that were lying near and putting them into cases under her directions.

Silently Carmichael stood and watched her swift movements. Then to attract her attention he said:

"Have you been dancing, Betty?"

"Yes, indeed. We have been dancing, and I have had a lovely time."

Betty, dismissing the footman, and putting the record down that she held in her hand, went towards her husband. She was smiling as she went.

Carmichael sat down in an armchair.

"Gwen Lamley and her brother have been here and we have danced—at least Gwen and I did. He couldn't be persuaded. I am sure I don't know why."

"Are they not rather often here?"

"He did not want to come, Gwen said, but she made him. She told him it was the proper thing to do to come and see how we were after last night."

Carmichael was recalling more clearly something Mrs le Jarbey had said to him the previous night.

Betty was standing by the armchair in which her husband had seated himself, and while speaking she had lifted one of his hands from the arm of the chair, and seating herself where his hand had rested, laid the hand upon her knee.

"Peter, you are very tired."

"Yes."

He spoke absently. His mind was filled with the kaleidoscopic-like scenes that had been flashed before him by his host that evening. And the two figures, the one climbing the light iron fence, the other vaulting over it, were blended with the shadowy ones called up by Aspendale's recital.

He closed his eyes as if to shut out the vision, leaning his head against the back of the chair.

"What is it, Peter? Are you so weary?" She laid her hand upon his forehead just where the grey hair touched it.

He moved a little nearer to her, but did not reply.

"Where are you so tired? Is it your head? Or is it all-over-tiredness? Tell me, dear." Her lips touched his forehead.

"I do not know, little one."

He drew nearer to her still, until his head rested on her shoulder. Then he said:

"It is possible to absorb another man's sufferings until they become one's own. I think that is what is the matter with me, Betty. One gets at last to see the picture of one's own life in that of another."

"I don't understand what you mean, Peter dear."

"I don't think I want you to understand."

He spoke gently, he was feeling more emotional than he had felt for a very long time, more than he had thought he could have felt.

"I can tell you of one thing which has vexed me a little." He was catching at a very small reality, but it touched upon a vision that was being flashed intermittently upon him, of figures—shadowy, tragic, indistinct—figures that were begotten from the actualities of another man's life. And from that vision he was shrinking, for it was a vision thrown upon the screen of the future.

"I wish," he said, "that the Lamleys would not use that short cut from the village. It only takes five minutes more to come by the road. I have told Lamley once about it."

"But, Peter dear, it was I who told them to go back that way. There was rather a bad storm brewing."

He gave a little nod of assent, his eyes gradually fixed on the far end of the hall. The

electric lights were still burning, and his face gradually became set in a strange calm, as if he had passed out of that emotional strain which had held him. Betty watched him with concentrated care. There was something in Peter—always had been something—which baffled her. She loved him, but there was always present with her a sense of his aloofness as of one on a higher plane than her own. She was afraid of him. She was conscious of this even in her moments of adoration. And as she sat watching him she wondered if she could have told him—could have dared to tell him—all she had told Hugh Lamley the previous night.

There was a long pause.

"What a strange woman Mrs. le Jarbey is," her husband said at last with a sigh. "Do you like her, Betty?"

"I was afraid of her last night. She said to me when I was dancing with Captain Lamley: 'Gather ye roses while ye may.' But it was the bitter, scornful look she gave me that was frightening. I asked Captain Lamley what she meant, but he said he didn't know."

But Peter Carmichael had one of those sudden, lightning-like flashes of comprehension, and he knew what Mrs. le Jarbey had insinuated.

"I would be careful, Betty, what you say and do before Mrs. le Jarbey. She would be your undoing if she could."

CHAPTER XIV

THE CRACKLING OF TOAST

THE dance was on Wednesday evening, and this was Friday morning—two days later

It threatened to be hot and close, and Gwendoline Lamley stood looking out of one of the small dining-room windows of The White House. The casement was thrown as far back as it would go. She was leaning out calling her brother to come to breakfast.

"Your porridge will be cold," she said.

"All the better this hot morning."

"If you still want to linger, bring me some of the deep red roses. No, not those pale ones, I want the deep red for my bedroom."

He came, bringing several blooms.

The dining-room at The White House faced south, and through the small windows which stood open the sun shone. It was a long, narrow room with wainscoted walls and ceiling, dark and cheerless on wintry days, but cool on such a day as this.

The table like the room, was long and rather narrow, each end being occupied respectively by Mr. and Mrs. Lamley; Gwendoline sat with

her back to the windows, and so on the sunny side. The other two occupants who were opposite her, being her brother and an old lady known as "Granny."

Standing by the breakfast-table, Hugh Lamley turned over several letters that were lying near his plate. One addressed in bold black writing he reversed. Gwen had hawk's eyes, and he did not want her to see it.

"Do sit down, Hugh, I want the table cleared early because of my Children's Playing Grounds' Committee."

Mrs Lamley was short, thin and alert. Her nostrils were a little pinched as was her mouth. And she had a quick way of turning her head and looking about her very much as a bird does. She had sorted the cups and saucers noiselessly. Even the teaspoons had each been set in its place without a rattle. In all her movements she gave the impression of being well oiled. She was like a piece of well-made machinery, very swift and very silent in all her movements.

Her son, after glancing at the bold handwriting on the envelope which he was stowing away in his breast pocket, tasted the plate of porridge and pushed it aside.

"Mother, it is of no use trying to get me to eat porridge. You wouldn't like it if you had been boiling for some years in India."

"Quite right, dear," she said calmly. "Go on with your bacon."

Mr. Lamley of the firm of London solicitors, Lamley & Crutchley, was big, slow and ponder-

ous, and he lifted each piece of bacon from the dish, arranging it on a plate and handing it to his son with all the dignity of a Lord Mayor.

"When you come home, my son," he said, "you should do as home does."

Hugh Lamley had no answer ready at the moment. His mind was on Mrs le Jarbey's letter which was safely hidden in his pocket. He was annoyed that she should write to him, then turning his attention to the old lady sitting on his left, he asked if the morning were too hot for her, and laid his hand gently upon the little withered one on the table beside him.

The tired eyes were turned upon him, and a smile broke over her placid face.

She had been beautiful in youth, and was still beautiful with the beauty that belongs to old age. Her white lace shawl, her cap of white lace with its sprinkling of pink fringed daisies, were Victorian. Her placidity also was Victorian; it belonged to the days that were spacious and in which everyone had time for everything. Time to sit in a garden during the loveliness of a summer's evening and watch the cawing rooks flying high and homeward, and the shadows creeping from shrub and tree, and the gradual closing of the flowers while sleep and rest fell upon everything. And when winter came and the darkness put the rooms into shadow across which flickered the firelight, there was the drawing of the curtains, the shutting out of the wintry storm with its snow and whirling

THE CRACKLING OF TOAST

blast, and the cheerful lighting of the lamps. Presently the tea, fragrant and with the smell of hot buttered toast would come in.

This was the old Granny's past, and she had brought its simple pleasures and its placidity through with her.

The young man looked down at the delicate face that no cosmetic had ever touched. The aquiline nose was finely cut, the lines of the lips were tender, and the eyes with the lacelike tracery which had been left by smiles, laughter, tears, could yet weep and smile in sympathy.

"Granny, how is the tapestry curtain getting on? I have not seen it for two days." The speaker passed the tip of one finger gently down the soft cheek.

The old face sprang into life.

"It is going on very well. Gwen brought me more crewel wool. Shades of blue-green and faded red. So pretty."

Here the little homely idyll was broken into by the capable, matter-of-fact mother.

"Hugh, my dear—remember my committee meeting, please."

"Sorry, Mother." And Hugh turned his attention to his coffee, bacon and toast.

The stout, ponderous man at the end of the table rose, brushing the crumbs from his waistcoat. He gave a deep and prolonged "phew" because of the heat of the day. Then he stood with his hands clasping the back of his chair, viewing the table and its occupants. He had the air of a man about to make a speech.

but becoming irresolute, he turned away, carefully propping open the door, mindful of his wife's request when he had first come in to breakfast. He was rather tired of committee meetings, and associated them with the age of machinery.

Gwen watched her father going out of the room, then turning to her brother asked what he was going to do?

"Nothing in particular," was the reply.

"Because last night I promised Betty Carmichael that you and I would go up this morning and play tennis with her. She is getting so nervous about this tournament."

"Sorry, but I can't go."

He fidgeted with his coffee-cup and spoon, and the expression of his face clouded.

"But, Hugh, I told her I was sure you would love going."

"Gwen, you should not promise things for me without asking."

"You used to be keen on going up to Long Ashes"

Gwen was growing disconcerted. She had in reality angled for this arrangement.

"I think it is rather horrid of you, Hugh. For I do so try to make you have a jolly time *Why cannot you go?*"

"Because I don't *want* to go," he replied a little curtly. "No one can give his reasons why he smiles or sighs"

"Smiles and sighs have nothing to do with tennis."

"Perhaps not."

Hugh put rather a large piece of dry toast in his mouth, his strong white teeth crushing it noisily.

Gwendoline watched him, annoyance at his refusal to go with her that morning to Long Ashes deepening.

Another piece of dry toast was taken from the rack, and was crushed in a way irritating to his sister, with what seemed to her the regularity and power of a machine.

"Hugh, you are making such a crackling with your toast," she at last burst out with—"it gets on my nerves."

He looked up quickly, hastening to make short work with his bacon.

"Crackling! It is unusually hard-baked or whatever you call it."

"There is nothing wrong with the toast," she returned irritably. "It is the way you eat it."

"Sorry, Gwen."

He drank the remainder of his coffee, put his knife and fork together, and rose from the table. Then he beckoned to his sister to follow him, filling his pipe and waiting for her a second or two in the narrow, dark hall.

She came quickly and put her arm through his.

"I am a beast," she said.

"You are not a bad sort, Gwen. And I rather love you, old girl. But——"

He made a longish pause, then added:

"When you know a little more of life, and

understand its many difficulties, you will not jump at me as you do sometimes."

"But, Hugh, this is Friday, and the tennis tournament begins on Tuesday. And Betty is getting so very nervous about her playing. And you have been helping her all along, and now to leave her in the lurch—oh, Hugh! You are very fond of telling me to play the game. I don't call this playing the game!"

"Gwen, I am trying to play a harder game than perhaps you dream of."

CHAPTER XV

TEARS

THE day had been a disappointing one for Betty. There had been no tennis—and this was Friday and the first day of the Tournament was on Tuesday.

However, nothing could be done. Gwen Lamley had 'phoned after breakfast that she was sorry, but had found that her brother had made an engagement to go up to Town, adding that she herself would have come to do what she could, but the Cleveley girls had just dropped in imploring her to give them some practice—and really Iris needed it, for her service was simply horrible; so if Betty would forgive her she would not come up that morning, etc.

After this Betty took the corn to her peacocks, but the birds were dull and stupid, or so she thought them; and after throwing the corn on the ground she left them and went back to the house.

In the afternoon several girls called to see her, and the whole conversation was upon tennis—the Tournament, the weather. Would it be too hot? Would it rain? Would they be drawn to

play with the right people? And so on, and so on.

Betty wanted to talk about Hugh Lamley; about his splendid style, his certainty of placing a ball just where it was the best for himself and partner, his service, his swiftness, his lightning-like movements over the ground.

But his name was never mentioned, and a hesitation she herself did not understand prevented her bringing it into the conversation.

At last the callers went

Tired and listless, she got up and threw the windows yet wider open. By this time it was late afternoon and the front of Long Ashes was in shade, but the air that came in was heavily weighted.

She stood looking out. The flowers and plants and shrubs shared sunshine and shade between them, the strip of park beyond the gardens was yet in the full blaze of the sun, as farther away still was The White House

But it was on The White House her eyes rested. The sun-blinds were lowered over the drawing-room windows, and the little canvas tent had been erected in that shady corner of the lawn.

Would he be in that little canvas tent? Or would he be still up in Town? It interested her to think he would be in the tent. It would be cooler there. And he would be smoking. She liked the scent of his cigarettes. She and Gwen had once come upon him asleep in the tent. He had been reading, and the book had fallen

from his hand face downwards, its leaves crushed upon the ground. And she and Gwen had laughed, but he, springing up hastily, had been confused, and had used her name apologetically.

And she recalled the tone of his voice, and the way in which he pronounced the word "Carmichael." He said it differently somehow from anyone else—or so it seemed to her.

Here Betty laughed softly to herself. Then she pronounced the word "Carmichael." But she could not give the precise intonation that she desired.

After this she came out of her dreamlike reverie.

On the surface of her mind were thoughts about Gwen Lamley. Was it she who preferred staying at the bottom of the hill to coming up to play tennis at Long Ashes? Or was she indeed giving a telephone message which actually expressed her brother's wishes?

Gwen was a soul shut up in a body, and how mysterious that was! But everyone was the same when you came to think about it.

Gwen! Yes, she certainly differed greatly from all the other girls. Gwen prided herself upon being "modern," whatever that might mean. But whatever it was it did not seem to make Gwen happy. Gwen always appeared to be like a bird in a cage beating its wings to obtain freedom. She was always "bored," and sometimes "bored stiff." And she never believed in things. Religion—oh! she would give a

SHE WAS HIS WIFE

"puff" and put out her lips in contempt. And marriage! She, of course, had curious notions about that, emphasizing the fact which she was often asserting, that she was modern, quite perfectly modern. To Betty it would appear that Gwen had broken away from all the old rules of life—exactly like some wild animal, dashing about, careering madly. Never happy unless she was being what she called "amused."

Beneath these graver thoughts one thought that burned as a flame into her mind ever came. How was it, and why was it, that the recollection of Hugh Lamley so constantly obtruded itself. It was never long absent. It seemed almost as if she constantly thought of him. She ever saw him, tall, erect, with eyes that spoke of honesty of purpose. There did not seem much mystery in him as in the others with whom she associated. She knew instinctively that he was ever in sympathy with her. With him she had no fear of being misunderstood. Her laughter would be echoed by him with cheery word. And she noticed, could but notice of his ever awareness of her presence, of her whereabouts in the room. He would be apparently in close conversation with someone, and yet afterwards he would tell her how he had been in perfect agreement with all she herself had said.

She dwelt upon her own response to all this in him. Was it not true that to be in his presence was to be conscious, as it were, of an atmosphere of repose, of security? As a swimmer who has been out in turbulent waters,

and who finds himself in a haven where the waters are calm enough to mirror the sky, so she felt when he was with her. Yes, she liked him. Liked him exceedingly. She knew that. She acknowledged it to herself.

Suddenly, as with the turning on of an electric burner, a flash of light came upon her, telling her of an abyss on which she stood. Her heart stopped, then with a bound it sent the hot blood to her cheeks, her forehead, her throat. She was conscious of her ears burning as if something hot had been laid upon them. Could all this mean that she was falling in love with Hugh Lamley? she asked herself. That sense of rest and quietude by which she was possessed whenever she was with him—was it love? And if love, then what was to be done?

Her hands were locked together, and she twisted and wrung them, till the knuckles were white.

"It cannot be true," she asserted to herself again and again. "It is only liking. And in liking there can be no harm. He is young and we have enjoyed being together, and I would try to fancy to myself that he was my brother. And to like one's brother—to be happy with him, as Gwen is happy with him—oh, where can be the harm?"

Then there rose up within her the ugly head of a serpent. "Fool, fool," it whispered, "take up that which the gods are laying at your feet. 'Gather ye roses while ye may, old time is still a-flying.' Have your fill of love. The days of

youth pass swiftly. Take counsel of Gwen. She will teach you how to get the best out of life. The old ways are being uprooted—old age will soon enough be here—be courageous and cast the old ideas to the wind.”

Slipping from the chair on which she had been leaning looking out of the window, she laid her arms upon the seat, and burying her face upon them she sobbed aloud.

“Peter, my Peter,” she whispered

CHAPTER XVI

THE TOURNAMENT

THEY were glorious, the two tennis-courts at Mrs. Catterlen-Berkley's, where for three days they were to be devoted to a tournament which had been promoted by Mrs Catterlen-Berkley for the benefit of the local District Nursing Fund. The prizes she gave herself; the entrance fees of the players and the gate money were to go wholly to the one cause, and she had seen to it that the Tournament was widely advertised, judging that many who socially were not admitted to the gardens at Catterlen Cross and which were very extensive, would without doubt not refuse to pay the half-crown entrance fee at the lodge gates

Shrubberies and trees bordered these two tennis-courts. Beyond were clumps of oak trees with spaces between that showed more distant woods, and yet farther away the blue line of hills against the horizon. Out there was the park with cows lying in the deep grass chewing the cud Well away from the tennis-courts, but following a border more or less broken, were irregular herbaceous patches of bright coloured

flowers. These in turn furnished a line of demarcation to the closely mown grass, which as green velvet enclosed the courts of reddish hue.

And through and about the many acres of gardens in which the tennis-courts were set as a cameo, were cool shrubberies, long winding paths that led to rockeries, flower-beds, and away to the left and close to a wicket-gate which opened upon the park, was a pond where lilies grew. At the lower end of this pond was a path that wandered off by itself until it came to a carefully clipped hedge, the hedge being suddenly duplicated and showing a fascinating path, wide enough for two to walk abreast. It had branches turning right and left, until the heedless follower of these paths discovered that he had been allured into a maze where, try as he would, no outlet could be readily discovered. Altogether it was a fascinating garden which surrounded the tennis-courts, and already some scores of people had paid their entrance fee at the lodge gates.

Most of them, however, were connected in some way with the Tournament itself, either as players or interested spectators. And these were collected in little groups near the courts with their various followers of wives, husbands, cousins and sons. Apart from these, and obviously uninterested in the tennis, and dropping into sight by ones and twos, came the people who were availing themselves of the opportunity of seeing the gardens. But they soon disappeared, wander-

ing off among the paths and shrubberies in search of some cool retreat.

A thin haze lay over the gardens at Catterlen Cross that June morning. The sky was of a pale azure; the air was motionless; the leaves even on the highest of the oak trees, never gave the least quiver that would have told of movement in the upper air. But for the hum of human voices, and the idle laughter of the tennis players not yet set to work, a brooding silence hung over the place. Even the bees seemed languorous and drowsy as they went from flower to flower of the herbaceous border, and the birds were silent and few were to be seen.

"Jolly lucky for you people who haven't to play in this beastly heat."

It was Gwen Lamley who was speaking.

A genial, good-natured looking man with a strong Scotch accent, Anderson by name, raised his eyebrows while he smiled broadly.

"Ye should no' be put out wi' the weather, Miss Lamley. This bit o' mist will soon lift, an' then ye'll see the sun in all his glory, for hev ye not been praisin' this bonnie weather?"

The Rev. Bailey Harvey, the young curate from a neighbouring village, tried to say something pleasant about the possibility of a change, but was promptly snubbed by Gwen.

"Mine was but a small remark," he protested.

She turned scornfully away. She was annoyed at having been drawn to play in the ladies' doubles with Eveline Crookhurst, who was

noted for her fault of running disastrously up to the net.

Mrs. le Jarbey had just joined the group, and was looking youthful and specially handsome in the large shady hat which she wore. And she was conscious of her good looks.

"Will there be too much sun for ye, Mrs le Jarbey?" asked the Scotchman.

She smiled languidly and turned her fine eyes upon the speaker.

"The heat of England never distresses me," she said.

"Doesn't it now," was the hearty rejoinder. "But mebbe ye're of that wise disposition that never allows itself to be put out wi' the weather. For after all it comes to this, that if ye're put out wi' the weather ye're put out wi' yerself. An' that's not se very pleasant."

This was complimentary, and Mrs. le Jarbey gave her pretty, low laugh.

"You draw an ugly picture," she said, "of anyone dissatisfied with the weather."

"Not of you." He chuckled and smoothed his sandy beard.

She remained silent, drooping her eyelids and smiling as though she accepted the compliment. But the next moment she caught sight of Betty Carmichael and her husband coming on to the ground. She moved towards them.

"Dear Betty!" she called when she was within speaking distance—"how deliciously cool you look in your white and green draperies."

"Looks are deceptive," Betty called back with a laugh that did not ring quite truly.

"I confess you look tired," responded Mrs. le Jarbey sympathetically. "Why, my dear, you look jaded! You might have finished your playing instead of but just beginning the day. Doesn't your wife look tired?" she questioned Carmichael.

He turned a scrutinizing gaze.

"Are you tired, Betty?"

"Not a scrap," and she flushed painfully.

Had she spoken truly she would have said that for the past few nights and days she had been haunted by a spectre that refused to be laid.

But Mrs. le Jarbey persisted.

"You won't let her play, will you, Mr. Carmichael? Poor child, she does not look like it."

Again he turned scrutinizing eyes upon his wife.

The flush deepened, as awkwardly and with visible perturbation Betty disclaimed any feeling of fatigue.

"It is too bad of you, Mrs. le Jarbey," she said "It is hot to-day, and perhaps that is making me look tired. I don't know. At any rate I am not tired," she added emphatically.

"Poor child!" said Mrs. le Jarbey as if to herself, and was turning away when she saw Hugh Lamley coming in her direction, or was it in Betty Carmichael's? If the latter it had to be frustrated. She was too astute to go towards

him, but catching his eye she smiled and held out a perfectly gloved hand in welcome.

He was in white flannels, youthfully muscular and splendid. A typical young Englishman walking erect and with firm step, he was good to look at as he came towards Mrs. le Jarbey and the Carmichaels.

"I need not ask if you are feeling fit, Hugh?"

It was Mrs. le Jarbey who spoke.

"Very fit, thanks," he replied as he came up to the group and took Mrs. le Jarbey's proffered hand. He smiled and bowed to the Carmichaels. The number of people had so largely increased that handshaking had become unnecessary.

"I have just been telling Betty," went on Mrs. le Jarbey, as though the new-comer had interrupted a conversation, "that she looks much too tired to play. I fear your pupil will not do you credit—eh, Betty dear?"

This brought from him a momentary but searching glance at Betty. Then turning to Mrs. le Jarbey he said with a quiet smile:

"If you have ever played in a tennis tournament, Mrs. le Jarbey, you will know it is nervous work, though Mrs. Carmichael has no cause for nervousness, for she is an excellent player."

"There's a pretty compliment for you, Betty dear," smiled Mrs. le Jarbey graciously. "But after all it is a case of a master praising his pupil. In India Captain Lamley gave me lessons in chess, so I know how well he teaches—and so sympathetically." She looked under her eye-

lids at Hugh Lamley and smiled—sarcastically, bitterly.

"Why be reminiscent?" he asked, his smile a faint reflection of her own.

"Because it pleases me," was her rejoinder, and turning to Betty she laughed as though her mood was pleasantly reminiscent and playful.

Carmichael said something to his wife.

"Really, Peter, I am not tired. Please do not worry about me."

"Put all thoughts of the playing from your mind, Mrs. Carmichael, then you will do yourself justice."

It was Lamley speaking. He had turned eyes that were quietly self-possessed upon her, and when their eyes met, he smiled.

At that moment Betty's partner for the doubles came up—Joan Jefferson, known to her intimates as John, a girl with projecting teeth, eyeglasses, and a swinging masculine walk.

"Hallo, Betty. Pretty fit?"

"Very."

"That's rippin'."

Others came on to the ground. Eva and Ellen Macquire, badly dressed but pleasant; a Cambridge undergraduate with an unpronounceable Indian name; Henry Morrison, good to look at in his flannels, a cousin of the Lamleys; two younger men, sons of a man lately come into the neighbourhood, reputed to be rich, and both said to be excellent players.

"Look here, Lamley"—and Henry Morrison

tapped Lamley on the arm with his racket—"isn't it time for us to be moving to the other tennis-court?"

"By Jove, yes. Wasn't that whistle meant to call us together?"

"Hugh, will you take me?"

It was Mrs. le Jarbey who spoke, and the look she flashed upon him was authoritative.

"Certainly, if you wish it," he responded awkwardly.

"Would I ask you, Hugh, if I did not wish it? Surely you ought to know me enough for that."

So perforce and wholly against his will, she moved off with him, her slow, languorous step taking no trouble to fit in with his, though he had shortened his stride to her needs.

Henry Morrison followed close on their heels, an amused expression on his face. "Chuck her, dear chap, chuck her," ran the current of his thoughts. Then he shrugged his shoulders, for he knew from experience that Mrs le Jarbey was not easily checkmated.

The mist had cleared off and the sky rivalled that of Italy, so blue was it. A slight breeze had risen but only enough to move the leaves that hung on the longer stems, those on the oak trees, heavy in themselves, were motionless.

The day grew much hotter, and very soon the shrubberies were sought after by those who, uninterested in tennis, longed for their shade.

But even there the sun filtered through, and

some who knew their way to the pond where the lilies grew, went there in the hope of finding it possible to soak their handkerchiefs in the water and bathe their faces.

The pond had many attractions. Some went so far as to remove shoes and stockings, and sitting on the bank, laved their feet and ankles in the clear water. This was done with a sense of "taking a liberty," but the heat was too great for the charm of water to be resisted.

If anyone really wanted to be cool, was the advice tendered by one of the bathers, the maze would be the place. So half a dozen, shoes and stockings in hand, walked down the grassy path between the well-trimmed hedges and were soon lost in the twists and turns of the leafy labyrinth. Laughter and calls for help soon followed, the latter evoking derision from those outside the maze. Further diversion, however, quickly followed upon one of those outside discovering rustic steps built up against a tree, from which point of vantage directions could be given to anyone hopelessly lost inside. But oddly as it seemed to those begging for assistance, they only got farther into the maze.

Meanwhile the sky seemed to be of brass and the heat became intense. Servants came out with iced drinks for the tennis players, and the games of both courts were suspended for several minutes. One or two of the players suggested that the lunch should be earlier, playing in the heat of the day thus being avoided.

But this was vetoed down. Those who were

playing well in spite of the beating of the sun's rays upon the courts, feared a break into their play. Those playing badly wished to get it over. So the games continued.

Presently the rumour reached the men's court that one of the ladies had fainted—falling down in the act of volleying a ball, and had to be carried off the ground. It was Eva Macquire, somebody said. This was readily believed, for the girl was known to be delicate and troubled "with a heart." At any rate this fact did not, of course, in any way affect the men's play, and they played on.

Mrs. le Jarbey had been provided with a seat near an elm tree, whose wide spreading branches threw abundant shade. This seat was as close to the men's tennis ground as was allowable, and Mrs. le Jarbey sat there not only in her very becoming shady hat, but under a large umbrella. She was rather anxious about the effect of heat upon the new powder and lipstick she had been persuaded to try. Gwen Lamley had said it was absolutely perfect and quite the best she had used. But Gwen was unreliable, had been Mrs. le Jarbey's thought, still, it was worth while trying, so easy was it of application.

The fact gradually filtered through to her that Eva Macquire had fainted, but her equanimity was undisturbed. The girl was too plain looking, too badly dressed to interfere with Mrs. le Jarbey in any way, so the girl's fainting did not interest her, and she fixed her attention again upon the

game. Hugh Lamley was playing magnificently, and she thrilled with delight.

Tall, graceful, swift and unerring in his strokes, to watch him filled her with intense pleasure. His partner, Morrison, was playing well; still, if they won the set the honours would rightly be Lamley's.

Mrs. le Jarbey was intent upon the play, and neither heard nor saw Joan Jefferson coming towards her, hot, flushed, swinging her racket, her masculine stride even swifter than usual.

"Isn't it an awful pity?" she called. "She really was playing well; and she went down suddenly like a shot"

"Who went down?" inquired Mrs. le Jarbey.

"My partner, bad luck. Betty Carmichael."

Joan Jefferson's voice carried far in its high, strident tones.

"She has had a sunstroke or something."

Hugh Lamley was in the act of serving at the close of a set. He heard what Joan Jefferson said, and his wrist gave a slight jerk. His ball went into the net. He clashed his teeth viciously, his eyebrows drawn together in anger.

"Damn it all," he exclaimed, making a rush at the net.

"What the devil made you do it?" called Morrison.

"No need to rub it in!"

And the next ball from Lamley's racket went skimming with terrific force over the net.

"Splendid!" called his admirers who were seated near the court.

And so with passionate energy Hugh Lamley played to the end of the set.

The men's doubles were finished almost at the same time at the other courts, and the men gathered together under a group of spruce firs which afforded ample shelter. All were talking volubly, and every man was dissatisfied with his play.

"Too beastly hot"—"Damnable"—"I blame Mrs Catterlen-Berkley for persisting in keeping to this date"—"No, no, you can't change dates"—"At any rate you have done pretty well, no need for you to grumble"—"Who was it?"—"What do you mean?"—"Went down as if she were shot"—"It was Mrs Carmichael"—"I missed two balls, hang it all."

"What about Mrs. Carmichael?"

This was Hugh Lamley speaking.

He had not dared to ask any questions, but when Anderson, the Scotchman, had replied to a vague inquiry, he felt it was possible for him to gain some knowledge of what had happened to Betty Carmichael without any comment being made.

"Is it Mrs. Carmichael ye're wantin' to know about?" asked Anderson turning towards Lamley. "Why, man, ye hev a face only fit for a funeral!"

"Naturally I want to know," returned the young man. "They are friends of ours, so it would be extraordinary if I felt no interest"

The Scotchman's blunt speech had nettled

Lamley, and helped him to assume an attitude half of interest, half of indifference.

"Well, then, I can tell ye at once, she's no so bad as she might be, or as folk at first tried to make out. Because of the heat they all said it was a sunstroke. She was unconscious—that I do know, for I helped Carmichael to carry her into the house. I was sorry for her, puir bit thing. Still, mebbe it wasna anything as bad as a sunstroke."

"A fainting fit, you think?"

"I'm not a doctor, so don't ask me, I canna say as much as that. The doctor said——"

"There was a doctor——"

The eagerness with which Lamley interrupted caught the Scotchman's attention, and he looked at him quizzically. "Aye, for certain there was. The telephone was set to work—Carmichael saw to that. Eh, my—what that man thinks of his bonnie wife!"

"But the doctor——"

"He was here a few minutes after we got her upstairs and on to the bed. An', ses he, it may be a little touch of the heat, but keep her in this darkened room till evening, and then take her home, an' with care and quietness she'll soon be all right. Eh, my—but she is a bonnie wee thing, no wonder her husband was scared. She looked like a broken flower lying on yon bed."

With Lamley the relief that Betty Carmichael had not succumbed to sunstroke such as he had known in India, was tempered by a kind of acrimonious jealousy of this somewhat rough

Scotchman. He who unhappily loved her, had to feign an unconcern that he did not feel; had to school his manner to that of common courtesy and turn the conversation into such a channel as would make those about him believe Betty Carmichael had passed from his thoughts. Whereas now the Tournament and all that it had meant was nothing to him.

Later Mrs. le Jarbey, looking bored and languorous, claimed his attention.

"Hugh, do you think there is such a thing as iced coffee to be had anywhere?"

With a feeling of annoyance he turned and faced her, saying he really did not know whether such a thing was to be had.

"Will you take me to the refreshment-tent? And let us see what we can get. The heat is most exhausting. Do you mind if I take your arm? Thanks, dear Hugh. And now tell me, how was it you came to send that ball into the net?"

"Because I am a fool," he returned curtly

PART II

CHAPTER XVII

CONVALESCENCE

It was a week after the closing day of the Tournament. Hugh Lamley and Henry Morrison had carried off the prize in the finals of the men's doubles. The local paper had exhausted its adjectives in praise of their playing; also in praise of the plucky endeavour of less skilled players who had faced them. The Indian, with his name spelt in a different way in each column, and the Scotchman, had come in for praise which was only a trifle less ornate than that given to Morrison and Lamley. Of the ladies less could be said, but their picturesqueness was dwelt upon and the beauty of the gardens which was for them a suitable setting.

Languid, and not wholly recovered from the effects of the heat on the day of the Tournament, Betty Carmichael lay in the room which was specially devoted to her use on the second floor of Long Ashes. She noted the clear-cut shadows cast by the hot July sun upon the lawns, flower-bed and gravelled paths. She sighed. She wished the heat would go.

Then struggling with the ennui of weakness, she turned a faint, half-hearted attention to a

strip of field which she could see between the tall ash trees. The field was being denuded of its sun-dried hay-crop by men who time after time brought a wagon within sight, loaded it and then led the horses over the rise in the hill, and so disappeared. She waited and watched for the next one. It came. It was loaded, and now the last of the hay was carried from the field.

She was sorry the carrying of the hay had come to an end. It had served to amuse her, though she admitted to herself it was a somewhat poor amusement.

The scent of the hay had been delicious, and some of it yet remained in the air. She closed her eyes and drew her breath in slowly by her nostrils, savouring its sweetness.

Some roses stood in a vase on a table near her couch and within reach. It was late for roses, but some had still lingered as buds, and as they opened they had been carefully gathered. Betty specially loved roses, and these had been specially gathered for her. He, her husband, specially reserved this task for himself. "I wish to gather the roses for Mrs. Carmichael myself," he had told Saxby, the gardener.

So after what had seemed too fatiguing to Betty, that simple drawing of her breath while her attention was given to the scent of hay, she turned her face on its cushion in the direction of the vase of roses.

She looked at them a full minute before she took them up.

"Oh, Peter, Peter," ran her thoughts, "I wish, I wish you would not gather them. I wish you would forget me—I wish—I wish——"

Here, with a swift movement, she swung her feet from the couch, and, placing the vase on the table, she rang a bell which stood near the vase on a small table.

The ringing of the bell quickly brought a nurse from an adjoining room. She was middle aged, Scotch with a rather strong accent, sharp of eyesight and sweet of face.

"What for the noo are ye ringin'?" she said, laying a gentle hand upon the girl's shoulder.

"Nurse, I want—I want—I do not know what I want! But I'm sick at heart. I think I want to die."

"Toots! that's bad manners to yer husband when he's that fond of ye."

"Nurse, you don't understand."

"I don't indeed, my lassie."

"I am just a child in the dark. And I want someone to comfort me."

So saying, Betty Carmichael began to weep hysterically.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CONFESSION

THE month of July passed slowly. Welcome clouds had risen, had gathered, had poured down their contents upon the parched land. The fields had recovered a little of their early verdure, and the various crops in which the farmers were interested had somewhat benefited. A breeze had arisen time after time, and the heads of corn that were now filling nodded and bowed under its influence, making the fields into soft, billowing-like seas of palest gold. The wild flowers had been dwarfed, and few, owing to the great heat of the late June, had made a tardy recovery.

As it was with the wild flowers, so it had been with Betty Carmichael. Was it the heat of that unfortunate Tournament day, mused her husband, that had brought about this languor which refused to yield either to love or skill. Silently he observed her unwonted pallor. He fretted about her lack of strength, her want of interest in all that at other times had filled her with child-like gaiety. Even her peacocks were neglected. She was too tired, she would say, when the

basket of corn was brought to the dining-room for her to take to the birds: someone else must feed them.

Her husband would watch her from one of the windows, loitering slowly about in the garden, and he would go to join her. But the song of the birds, the skimming flight of the swallows, the fluttering of the butterflies over the flowers, when spoken of by him attracted but a momentary glance.

"Dear heart," he said to her one day, where they stood in front of a rose-bed, "it seems to me that you are ill and will not own it . . . Is there nothing I can do for you? Nothing that I can get for you?"

"Nothing, Peter dear. It is nothing really. I am only over-tired—the hot summer has done this. And I am very stupid."

She passed a hand through his arm, and he, laying his hand upon it, held it gently.

Slowly they loitered, until coming to a rustic seat she suggested they should sit down.

Carmichael's face did not wear its usual expression of serenity, but was troubled, his eyes full of questioning.

"I think, dear," he said, "you have been worse since that picnic-tea you had in the garden a week ago."

"I own it was a dull affair."

"And that tired you?"

"I suppose it did. You see, the very people who would have made the thing 'go,' could not come."

"You mean the two Lamleys and the Scotchman."

"I particularly wanted the Scotchman, because he was so kind in picking me up that Tournament day, and helping you to carry me in." Betty hesitated a moment, and then went on speaking:

"Gwen Lamley had promised to go to Mrs le Jarbey's, and Captain Lamley had an engagement in Town. He often has, I think."

Carmichael moved a little nearer to his wife, resting his hands on his knees. His feet were a little apart. His eyes were on an ant that was laboriously making its way across the gravel to the grass. It went over the big stones—found an awkward crevice—turned back to start again.

The minutes passed and Betty asked what he was thinking about.

He sat up, turned round and faced her.

"I am thinking of Aspendale. His love for his wife is killing him or driving him mad."

"You still ride with him in the morning?"

"Practically every morning, except when I go up to Town."

"Don't let us talk about him," she said hastily. "Something makes me shudder—I have a horrible foreboding——"

"Poor chap, he is to be pitied and not shunned."

The speaker's expression was serious, intimate, appealing. Then as if in obedience to an irresistible impulse of tenderness, he stooped

towards her, his arm round her, and kissed her on the lips.

"Dear heart," he said, "if I could but make you well."

"I want nothing, nothing in the world. I am only tired. . . . I think life is very difficult at times."

Suddenly he felt he was up against something too puzzling for him to understand, as an ignorant schoolboy feels at times towards his tutor.

He gently smoothed her hair with the palm of his hand

After a time she said.

"Let us go in, Peter"

But that night, after sleepless hours in which she heard the little travelling clock, which stood on her bedroom mantelpiece, chime the hours that circle round midnight, and as she saw the early summer dawn creeping up and into her window, she made her confession to Almighty God:

"Father, I love him. I love Hugh Lamley. And I am the wife of another man—a good man. I cry to You to help me I am miserable and broken-hearted I should like to die and get away from my trouble. I want to be with Hugh—I want to hear his voice—to see his face. But I am helpless. I am undone"

Here she began to weep in a feeble manner, as if she were too weary to cry.

But by the time the dawn had broken into her

room with the full glow of the summer sun, from sheer exhaustion of heart, of mind, and of body, she fell asleep.

And Carmichael, an hour later, coming in from his dressing-room booted and spurred, in readiness for his morning gallop, but walking softly, stooped over her, and seeing that there were traces of tears on her face, he did not speak, but tenderly kissed her on the forehead as she slept.

CHAPTER XIX

THE ASCENT

HILLS are difficult to climb.

Thus, if the hills have slowly been formed through thousands of millions of years, and have been subjected to pressure, upheaval, fire, frost, all the tools in nature's workshop. These hills are difficult.

If they are composed of rocks that stand sheer up and defy; of stones that cut and bruise; of turf that has been green in spring, but after the scorching of the sun has become slippery and insecure; of brambles that have thrown out long trailers which in turn have produced thorns, sharp and cruel; then does he who climbs struggle, slip, fall, and with sweating brow rises, and bending to his task, essays again to climb, if it may be that he has a heart of steel.

But what of the hills, which when split up have component parts of hatred, love, envy, jealousy, malice. Is that hill any the less difficult, any the easier to overcome; and is the climber surer of reaching the summit? We trow not

And what of everyone's personal hill, seen by

"I myself alone" It may be that even those with whom we live know not of the hill. We clamber, we stumble, we fall, and all that they say is "How pale is her cheek."

And this was the hill that Betty Carmichael saw as it shaped itself in the mists of her life. She knew that its rocks and stones would cut and tear. She knew that festering wounds would come, aching and throbbing. She knew that this hill had its component parts: self with its measure of desire; of the passionate will to climb and not to fall; to know that somewhere among the clouds there existed a summit, even though each footstep gained meant that the summit would appear to be yet one peak higher.

And so Betty Carmichael set about that very difficult thing, the banishing of a love that had come unbidden, unsought for, and as the wind that bloweth where it listeth.

"Play the game," Betty would say softly to herself. "And it may be . . . I . . . shall . . . win."

CHAPTER XX

ASPENDALE'S LETTER

It was the last day in July, and that evening after Carmichael had opened the dining-room door for Betty, who had dined with him for the first time since the Tournament, a letter was handed to him from James Aspendale.

On opening it he saw that it bore signs of haste. In some places the words were barely decipherable, and in one line the writer had not given himself time fully to replenish his pen.

The letter ran :

"Have just had a wire from my agent. He tells me they are in Venice. It is a year since I saw her, and I am eating my heart out. Will you accompany me? I dare not go alone. I dare not trust myself. It is my head. Sometimes it reels. There is no man in the world from whom I would ask this favour but you—to accompany me, I mean. I start to-morrow. The boat train leaves Victoria at 10.45 a.m. Will you be there? For God's sake do me this kindness.

"Yours,

"JAMES ASPENDALE."

Carmichael was not a little perturbed at this request.

There was Betty to consider. Though stronger, she was still considerably out of sorts. It was his duty, his privilege, his great desire to be with her. Aspendale had no real claim upon him, the man had got an unhealthy crank, and surely there was no need for him, Carmichael, to dance attendance upon a man whose mode of life at times seemed as if it were paving the road to madness. Besides, there were his own feelings, which surely might have a modicum of attention?

He would go to see what Betty thought about his acceding to Aspendale's request.

Hurriedly drinking his coffee he went upstairs, and found her lying partially dressed upon a couch near her bedroom window, the fragrant air coming in from the garden, and so gently as hardly to have power to move the silk curtain.

He handed her the letter which she read with no show of interest until she neared its close. Then she said:

"You can hardly refuse him, Peter."

"I don't know about that" He took the proffered letter from her hand and scanned it.

"It seems to be my duty, Betty, to stay with you. Besides, I wish to stay with you. You are not particularly strong——"

She interrupted him, raising herself into a sitting posture.

"Do go with him, Peter. I shall be so glad if you will go with him. I really should like to be alone for a little."

Her husband looked a little dismayed even while he smiled, saying:

"Do you want to get rid of me?"

"No, dear; that is a horrid way to put it. Can't you understand? Do you never feel as if you want to be left by yourself for a bit?"

"I do not think I ever do," he said.

She persisted.

"Do you never wish that you could shut the door of your room, and never see anyone for days and days?"

"Certainly not," he laughed.

She leaned towards him and caught hold of his hand.

"Dear, dear Peter," she said "I am so afraid of hurting you. But I should so love to be left alone for a few days. I want to look at myself."

That curious mood came upon him, which prompts a man to tease and play with an adored person. So he assured her she might sit all day in front of a mirror if she wished to admire herself, and he would not interfere.

"You men do not understand us!" Her eyes looked appealingly into his.

The words stung him.

"I try to understand you, dear."

"Peter, nurse said something very curious to me the other day, and I have thought a good deal about it. She says we all come alone into

the world—that we all live alone—and that we all die alone. Do you think it is true? ”

He paused for a full minute, then said slowly :

“ I am afraid it is quite true, Betty.”

His fingers closed firmly over the hand she had put into his, and held it protectingly. But he did not speak. She had hurt him, but he strove not to show it. There might be some truth, he thought, in what she had said about the inability of men understanding women. And Carmichael pondered upon the thought as one who has been struck a blow that aches and spreads an open hand over it. He had taken in the clear-cut meaning of her words that she desired to be left entirely to herself at Long Ashes for a time. But why was it that he, her husband, was the one to be banished?

He struggled against the thought, and not even did her request that he would kiss her serve to soften its bitterness.

Putting his arm round her, he did as she desired.

Then he said: “ I will send a note down to Aspendale to-night to say I will meet him to-morrow at Victoria.”

She looked up at him and smiled her thanks
“ Do not write to me, Peter—only a card with your address. I should like to have that.”

“ I shall send my address to the office. You can get it there if you happen to want it.”

He spoke curtly and turned away.

It was a hard hill to climb, and Betty closed

her eyes tightly and her lips, as without another word her husband closed the door and left her.

She felt Peter had misunderstood her and she was hurt

CHAPTER XXI

VENICE

LONDON, then the rush through the typical English landscape to Dover; across the Channel where wavelets danced in the sunshine and gulls followed in the wake of the steamer; then the bustle at Calais, a crowded train, speech in divers languages, distracted travellers, bustling officials, later the serving of dinner; then Paris.

Again bustle, excitement, seats to be taken on the Swiss express, followed by the brief hours of darkness. Berne, Milan, and finally the glory of the widespread plain of Lombardy

After this the lagoon, then—Venice

Again the bustle of a station with the deafening cries of touts from the various hotels; to be followed quickly by the comparative silence that comes with the stepping into a gondola, and so out into the soft grey light, with only the gentle swish of an oar, broken at times by the cries of gondoliers, and a strident oath when meeting unexpectedly at a canal corner.

As Carmichael followed Aspendale through the side door of the Hôtel Danielli, and so into what had been the garden-courtyard of the

family of the Danielli, he was a little startled to see that Aspendale was wearing a black moustache, and that his eyebrows had been blackened, so working a marvellous change in his appearance.

"It is necessary," said Aspendale in a low aside, smoothing his newly acquired moustache with his open hand and thereby fixing it more securely.

"Can you make a quick change?" he continued. "My agent has managed to get a table for us at the Grand Hotel. That is where they are staying. And I am anxious to be seated before they come in."

It was not long before the two men were walking along the open space of ground in front of their hotel, past the Doge's Palace into St. Mark's Square.

It was an ideal night. The evening was balmy, the excessive sultriness of the day yielding to the breeze from the Adriatic. And Carmichael looked up at the fast darkening sky. He had not been in Venice since the early days of his marriage, and the silence of the city struck him. Nothing broke the quietness of St. Mark's Square but the sound of voices and of laughter from the crowds sitting in front of the cafés, and the pattering of footsteps on the pavement, until there came the alien and obtrusively jarring hooting of a motor-boat, with the accompaniment of its swishing through the canal.

The two men walked on in silence, until Aspendale began muttering to himself:

"No use dwelling on the past—no use—no use—no use."

As the refrain of a song the low tones continued: "No use—no use—for ever never—never for ever——" until the two men reached the Grand Hotel, when Aspendale became silent, and preceding his companion, led the way into the hotel, and divesting himself of his light overcoat, handed it to an attendant, and, as one familiar with the hotel, went direct to the dining-room.

To Carmichael the Grand Hotel was unfamiliar, and as the view of that somewhat low-ceilinged room presented itself, his steps were arrested by its charm

It had been made attractive by its shaded electric lights, its many tables with their glitter of silver and glass, and their flowers which Italy produces in such profusion. Also there was the colouring given by the dresses of those women who were already seated at the tables. And as Carmichael stood looking past all the glitter and the colour, to the wide, uncurtained windows at the farther end of the room, there arose before him a panorama of silently moving gondolas upon the Grand Canal thrown into relief by the darkness, as upon a screen. The gondolas, the darkness which was intensified by the brilliance of the light within, flitted into the picture of this city of dreams.

Mechanically he moved to the table pointed out to him and Aspendale, and waiting for the latter to take his choice of the two seats, was

made anxious by the twitching of his companion's fingers and hands, and by the expression of his face.

"I would like to sit at this side," said Aspendale, pointing to the seat that had a full view of the room, adding querulously, "though I know you will object."

"Why should I?" was the smiling rejoinder. "One seat is as good as another for me."

"I have seen, Carmichael, ever since we arrived in Venice you have been trying to thwart me."

"I?"

"Yes, you. Who else could I mean?"

The expression of the speaker's face was aggressive, his eyes were quickly and furtively being turned every few seconds upon the entrance to the dining-room, then upon Carmichael.

"If I order wine will you be afraid to drink it?"

"Why should I be afraid?" Carmichael laughed lightly and put out his hand for the wine card.

"That is my business!" The wine card was snatched out of Carmichael's hand.

"Awfully good of you, Aspendale. But we pay for our drinks as for everything else."

The wine card was deliberately sent to the floor, and Aspendale stooped for it, and as he did so he said excitedly:

"They are coming, Carmichael. Do not look round—it may attract attention."

Some half-dozen people in detached groups were making their way to the tables. Some walked with definite step, as knowing where their seats were; one couple alone being shown to a table near the window.

"Do you see them?" Aspendale spoke thickly and with a catch in his breath. "We can see them more easily than they can see us. Some Americans were leaving and they got their seats. My agent found this out."

Aspendale worked restlessly with his fingers for a few minutes, then with a frown at Carmichael said:

"My agent has nothing to do with you. And you have nothing to do with him. Curiosity is bad in a woman, worse in a man. My agent is sitting over there. No, don't look in my wife's direction; you are here as my companion, you are not here to sit and gaze at my wife."

Carmichael had caught a glimpse of the two in passing: he, a tall, finely made man, otherwise with no looks in particular, while she, tall and with her queenly gait, her face of lovely outline, the small head crowned with its fair hair, lightly powdered with grey at the temples, was provocatively beautiful. She had looked back at her companion and had said something in jest, and Carmichael noted the musical ripple of her laugh.

But in obedience to his companion's sharp command, Carmichael turned his attention to the plate of soup put before him. He could not

understand Aspendale's mood, and did not like the aggressive manner shown to himself.

"Did you do as I asked you?" suddenly asked Aspendale. "My agent is sitting at a table with two other men to the right of that palm: the man with the black moustache. To-morrow, if you chance to come across him, he may be wearing a sandy one. And he won't have on those bushy black eyebrows. Eyebrows when bushy make the most effective disguise of anything."

Carmichael glanced in the direction indicated, noticing the while that his companion's whole attention was being given to the couple seated far off near the window.

"I am speaking the truth, Carmichael. That man is my agent. He belongs to a good firm, and he knows my story and does well by me. He was trained in the Yard. And I—I pay him well. But for him I should never see my Katinka."

"So you employ an agent," remarked Carmichael, feeling it a little difficult to know what to say.

"Yes. The same man. I keep him regularly employed. I always know where Katinka is and what they are doing. This, you will understand, is necessary, believing, as I do, that some day she will return to me."

Aspendale's manner was becoming quiet and more normal; and the long looks he took at the couple in the window between the serving of each course had apparently a soothing effect.

"I always hope, pray and believe, Carmichael, that some day I shall hear her light footstep on the stair, and hear her pushing aside the curtain from the library door, and in her pretty, dainty way, saying: 'It's only me. May I come in?' And, my God, what a welcome I would give her!"

"Does the idea help you?"

Carmichael lifted his glass of champagne, sipping the wine slowly as he noted the change in the expression of his companion's face. The quarrelsome, irritable twist of the mouth, the angry puckering of the eyebrows, had all been smoothed out, and but the signs of normal suffering remained on the face.

"It does help me, more than I can say. To know that she is in the same room with me is to feel soothed; and it comforts me to believe that all this waiting is but the seven years that I have to serve for my Rachel."

Carmichael could only nod acquiescence, feeling it is always a debatable question whether it is a wise act to uproot anyone's Paradise.

But the dinner was drawing to its close, and again Aspendale's manner became irritable and fidgety. If he pushed aside his wineglasses once he did it half a dozen times, and as often did he twist and turn his dessert plate.

Suddenly he leaned forward towards Carmichael, and one elbow resting on the table with thumb and fingers outspread, he covered his face in such a way that, while the action and attitude appeared natural, no one approaching

from the farther end of the room could recognize him.

Carmichael saw and understood the action. The two who were seated close to the windows had risen, and were making their way leisurely down the room, and in a few moments would necessarily be passing so close to Aspendale that if he chose he could lay his hand on the woman's arm.

Her voice was clear and silvery, and she was saying:

"Let us go out into the moonlight walking. We have been in a gondola nearly all day."

Aspendale was stooping towards his companion, not so much because he wished to be nearer to him, as in an effort to obliterate his very existence. A hectic flush was on his cheeks and his eyes were unnaturally bright, appearing all the brighter and more deeply set by reason of the contraction of his eyebrows.

"You do not know what it means to me, Carmichael, to hear her voice. It sets me on fire from head to foot. But it all tells me that the time is fast approaching when she will come back to me. The very pain and agony that I suffer assures me of that."

Aspendale, receiving no answer, suggested that they should go out and make their way back to their hotel; St. Mark's Square would be full of life and movement, and it was more than likely that musicians would be singing from a gondola opposite to the Danielli.

CHAPTER XXII

VENICE—*continued*

SHARPLY outlined against the clear night sky stood the winged lion of St Mark's. While low down, and against the landing-places, were rows of gondolas awaiting hire, their prows and their standing gondoliers making a dark fringe upon the moonlit water. And as Aspendale had predicted, they found later that there was singing from a gondola in front of the Hôtel Danielli, where a thinly scattered crowd had collected.

It being moonlight Venice was at its best. A slight breeze played on the surface of the water, ruffling it and breaking up the moon's reflections into fragments of quivering silver. With the soft plash of oars, gondolas drew near the Danielli hotel, paused, then passed on into the soft blue haze.

Musicians were seated on a stationary gondola a little distance from the hotel, and when the opening bars of *Ah che la Morte* were sounded by them, the gathering crowd, who were pacing slowly on the space of ground in front of the hotel, stood motionless.

The words laden with passion quivered and

throbbed. The tenor's voice rose, then the woman's, until the night became emotionally charged. The words were caught up and laden with the beauty of earth, and yet they carried with them the craving for the highest. Then softly, note by note, the music died away.

A trembling hand was laid on Carmichael's arm, and it was Aspendale who first spoke.

"She is sure to be here," he said. "She loves music. Will you help me? If I may lean rather heavily on your arm it will make my limp less conspicuous, and I want to move amongst the crowd?"

So the two went slowly a yard at a time until quite suddenly, as it seemed to Carmichael, they were almost within touch of the man and woman so intimately bound up with Aspendale's life.

Carmichael did not speak, he knew by the tightening grasp upon his arm that his companion was aware of their proximity.

Then almost at once, and without any ostensible reason, the woman turned and looked over her shoulder at Aspendale.

The glance, however, which had been given absent-mindedly, had caused her attention to be caught, for just as her eyes were turning away she looked again, and Aspendale, holding firmly to his companion's arm, moved a yard or so away, endeavouring, as he did so, to keep his limp in check.

The woman spoke to the man at her side, and he, in evident obedience to what she had said,

looked round and at Aspendale, after which he spoke to his companion and shook his head.

The man's negative had evidently decided his companion, for with comfortable gesture she drew the white lace shawl she wore more closely about her shoulders, as if settling herself to listen to the musicians, and began humming the tune they were playing in a low, scarcely audible voice.

She had, however, turned a little towards her companion, and now stood in such a position that her profile was clearly outlined to Carmichael. Suddenly she lifted her head, and looking up, her face caught the full light of the moon and became as a finely wrought cameo against the dark blue of the Italian sky.

The beauty of the cameo-like face thrown against the translucent blue was magnetic, and Carmichael's mind and soul seemed absent from the body, so powerfully did it hold him.

He was silent. This woman did not belong to the Helens of the world. . . Her face to him was as pure marble, and as one of those which take their place amongst the marbles of the world that hold men entranced, while leaving them passionless.

A convulsive clutch upon his arm recalled him to the world of realities, and at the same time a wisp of cloud blotted the radiance of the moon, and the face of the woman melted into the shadows.

"Let us go," muttered Aspendale, "my head aches."

"I do not wonder at your head aching," said Carmichael gently, his heart filled with compassion for the poor, frail figure that clung to him. "We have had a long journey, never stopping for any length of time since we left London. Would you like to turn in now to our hotel?"

"No. I am too restless. I want to get out of this moonlight. I want to get into a place where it is dark."

"But that would be difficult, wouldn't it?"

"I want you to come out with me in a gondola."

"I am quite ready, if you wish it. Here are plenty of men waiting for a job."

"I want you to go out with me alone."

The two men had moved slowly with the moving crowd that had begun to disperse with the cessation of the singing, and the two were now standing close to the door of the Hôtel Danielli.

"But look here, my dear fellow, I don't suppose we would be allowed to hire a gondola and go out, the two of us together, alone. At any rate"—the speaker laughed lightly—"I don't see myself going out with you as my gondolier."

"You are trying to escape me!"

"Certainly I am, if you want to take me out in a gondola alone with you." And though Carmichael laughed lightly again, in order to soften the force of his words, the laugh was no longer natural, but forced. A vague foreboding had seized him. There was something new and

strange to him in Aspendale's voice and manner. There was unreasonable insistence and anger. And the dark, deep-set eyes were looking covertly at him.

Pitying sympathy held Carmichael, and he said quietly:

"You and I have been travelling continuously for a good many hours. Let us go in and have a smoke and so to bed, as Pepys would say."

The face and figure of his companion assumed a cunning and crouching expression and attitude. He said:

"I will go in if you wish it. But understand, I go with you unwillingly."

"Stay out if you prefer it. But I am going in. I shall be quite ready to go anywhere you like to-morrow. To Lido, if you wish it, as you suggested at dinner. But I am too tired to stay out with you any longer."

So the weary, limping figure followed Carmichael into the hotel.

Earlier in the evening Carmichael had wired his address to his office in Town

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RETURN

THREE days later, all through the long return journey, Aspendale was nervously excited. He would get up to look out of a window. He would pull the sash up only to let it down again. Then he would light a cigarette only to throw it away, after which he would perhaps lean back in his corner seat, turning up the collar of his coat, his deep-set, dark eyes fixed on the flying landscape. If at such times he were spoken to, he would turn grimly upon the intruder.

To Carmichael he spoke seldom, and then only when he needed his help. So it was with a feeling of relief that Carmichael parted with his companion at Victoria.

"You will dine with me at The Grange some night soon?" called Aspendale as the door of the taxi was closed on him.

"Thanks very much—certainly."

Carmichael waved his hand, got into a taxi and gave his business address, believing letters might be there requiring attention.

As Carmichael entered the large outer office

of the business premises of Carmichael & Son, several heads were raised from the desks to give a momentary glance to see who could be coming in at so late an hour. The head clerk at the far corner had closed his books, and after placing them in the desk was locking it with an unnecessary rattle of keys. He had worked boy and man in that office, and was growing deaf and unaware of the noise he often made, so on seeing the head of the firm he hastened with heavy and creaking steps to meet him.

They greeted each other, the master as it was meet with so old a servant, shaking hands.

"Afternoon, Brown. Has Mr. Keddlestone gone?"

"Only just gone, sir. Things are very quiet—very little business doing. Said he would be back in half an hour. We are expecting a cable from Bombay. Mr. Keddlestone hopes to carry off that deal."

"Good. Any letters for me?"

"Yes, Mr. Carmichael, on the desk in your room."

There were several business letters and one from Betty.

At the sight of her handwriting a thrill of expectation shot through Carmichael. No letter or post card had followed him to Venice. He was not a man to feel resentment, but he had quietly determined that he would respond to Betty's request that he should not write to her while he was away. He had been away for nearly a week—six days to be exact. He had

simply done as she required. She could find no fault with him. But at the back of his mind he harboured a hope that she might have suffered somewhat from his silence. He regarded such an action on her part as a fit of childish ebullition of temper, waywardness, pettiness, and that such an action should react upon itself and bring a certain amount of discomfort was what quietly and temperately he desired.

Taking this view of Betty's request had caused him a certain amount of soreness. A request such as she had made was silly—foolish. He would not so much as allow to himself that the action had somehow tarnished the brightness of her charm for him. To reproach her even in thought would have been as the tilting at a child's windmill.

So during those six days' absence Carmichael resolutely pushed back from his thoughts all reference to Betty's action, though sometimes oppressed by the silence that had fallen between them, and this not of his own doing or desire. It was but as a grain of sand, yet even a grain of sand may destroy comfort. So this silence—the recollection of it would come to Carmichael in the waking hours of early morning; not of definite shape did the silence take, but as a shadow that fell across returning consciousness.

Therefore it was with a sense of relief that he opened the letter from Betty which awaited him.

He read it through. Then again. A third time he assayed it, but failed. After this he

folded it up carefully and put it safely away in his breast pocket.

The letter was lengthy, at any rate for Betty, who was not great at letter-writing. She said that as soon as Peter left—that very morning, in fact—she had sent Parker with the box up to Mudie's, also she had commissioned her to buy a piece of needlework the same as "that sweet, old-fashioned stuff Miss Belinda and Miss Betsy Ann used to work. You know what I mean—pictures and samplers. They hang in the little drawing-room. And she has brought me a very quaint thing to work—it has a text on it, a church, some cocks and hens, and a tiny little man with a wheelbarrow. So you can see from all this that I have plenty to do. Do you know, Peter, I think it a bad plan to *think*. I have been doing this lately and I have been made unhappy by it. That is why I wanted you to go away. I used to look at you, and at once it made me think about things. Now that you have gone away I feel as if I can square myself a bit—you know what I mean, to look at myself, to watch myself as if I were somebody else, because, Peter dear, I am not so good as I should be. And I do so want to be good. And I have made up my mind that I will pull myself round—a woman, or a man either, should be able to pull themselves round, don't you think? Well, that is what I mean to do. I will finish this letter another day.

"Dear husband, I am better and stronger. I see no one; have given orders that I am not

at home to anyone. Gwen Lamley rang me up to ask if she might come up to tea, but I said I had a headache and wanted to be quiet. I think this is all I have to tell you. I wonder when you will be home? It will be very nice to see you, Peter dear. I am trying hard to grow stronger. I put my arm round your neck and kiss you.

"Your own BERRY."

What she did not tell him, and what he never knew, was that she had laid her face down on her writing-pad and sobbed noiselessly but very bitterly. This hill she had set herself to climb was indeed steep, full of slippery rocks, of brambles that caught and tore her hands, and so high that oft-times her heart would faint and fail. But there ever came to her an echo of the familiar cry—"Play the game"—far off, and as it were from some tennis-court—"Play the game"—and in the voice that she had unawares come to love.

CHAPTER XXIV

PRIDE IS A GOOD SERVANT

THE last few weeks of August passed quickly.

Betty, with a determined effort, threw off the languor that yet at times clung to her, and began to join in the social life that was going on around her in its haste to make the most of the visibly shortening days. She went to garden parties unless specifically given over to tennis, when she pleaded as an excuse for declining that some slight effects of the heat-stroke were still upon her, her fear being that she might meet Hugh Lamley at these. Occasionally he would be at some of the minor gatherings, when he would be seen more or less in Mrs le Jarbey's company. In the more important of the festivities he was usually playing tennis, or was an apparently absorbed onlooker. But whatever the cause Betty noticed that he was very seldom near her, and then only for a passing greeting and a polite expression of pleasure at seeing her well enough to be out again. Then he would go on his way.

As each of these opportunities of speaking to him came and went, Betty thought he was

avoiding her whenever possible, and pride or something akin to it came to her assistance. She did not wish to be loved by any man other than her husband, but there had been moments in time past when the thought that Hugh Lamley loved her had filled her with a pseudo-exaltation.

She began to chafe at his evident avoidance of her. She would be standing near him, yet he appeared oblivious to the fact. She would look at him hoping to catch his eye and his attention. But no. His eyes would pass over her, unseeing, unmindful of her existence.

Yes, he had been kind and very helpful during the weeks she was practising for the Tournament, of that there could be no denial. But all this kindness and helpfulness had meant nothing beyond common courtesy extended to a neighbour. This was evident, and pride rose within her. Why should she suffer these heart-aches? Why lie awake at night haunted by the memory of this man's face. Why allow his voice to come to her causing that sense of depression which seems to be the peculiar prerogative of the dawn? Why suffer all these things for a man to whom she meant nothing?

Besides, did she not love Peter? How could she be disloyal to him who was her husband? Had he not poured out the love of a good man upon her; and sometime, perhaps, might not a child be born to them? Her love for Peter was a better, purer love than the uneven, fluctuating passion that at times held her captive for the

younger man. Betty knew this and clung to the belief.

It was the first of September, and Betty rode at her husband's side along the lane that led from Long Ashes to the common which lay two miles away.

The morning was early—but to Betty as to her husband, nothing was ever so enthralling as a gallop in these early hours. Besides, she was strong enough now to bear the rhythmic movement of her horse and to be lulled by it. And it was good to breathe the sweet, warm air fragrant with the scent of the hedgerows and the golden stubble, for much of the corn had been carried during the past fortnight.

Moreover, she was happy. For surely it was but a foolish fancy to suppose that she was falling in love with Hugh Lamley? Was she not a wife? And did not Peter fill every corner of her heart? She loved Peter—in many ways she loved him more than she could ever love Hugh Lamley. Yes, yes, all was right with her world.

The breeze was rising and soft, feathery clouds were drifting before it. There was a promise that the cooler weather would continue, and as they neared the common there rose on the breeze the fragrance of marjoram and wild thyme. Betty checked her horse as a lark broke away from a tuft of grass almost at her horse's feet, and she watched it rising until lost in the far distance of the sky. A rabbit scuttled out of a hole, and cantered for some yards in

front of her, then dived under a friendly bramble.

It was all very delightful, and Betty had a clearer sense of happiness than had come to her for many a day. She wondered if the honeysuckle at the far side of the common would have had time to ripen its berries. She knew she had gathered its flowers in June, when it hung in loose clusters on the hedge that bordered the common. It would be lovely to have some for her dressing-table, and Peter was clever in carrying things for her in his bridle-hand.

So at Betty's instigation they went off at a sharp trot until they reached the place where the honeysuckle had stretched out its trumpet-shaped flowers.

Surely enough, there hung the clusters of red berries, but Betty's horse refused with much curvetting to go near enough to the hedge for her to gather them. It arched its glossy neck dancing and turning. Then suddenly believing that it divined its mistress's wishes, it faced the hedge, gathered itself together, and was about to take the hedge at a standing leap.

"For heaven's sake hold her in," cried Carmichael. "There is a bad drop at the other side."

Cleverly, dexterously, Betty pulled the horse round, soothing it with her voice and smoothing its shoulder with her whip.

"Peter, do try to get me some, will you?"

He drew his horse up to the hedge and was leaning over to reach the desired berries.

when a voice suddenly cried from the other side:

"Can I get them for you?"

Betty's heart stood still for a moment, then with quick bounds sent the blood to her face.

"Thanks very much, Lamley," her husband was calling back. "My wife was wanting some of these red berries, and I find they are beyond my reach."

Hugh Lamley, after some difficulty in finding a suitable foothold at the side of the hedge where he stood, raised his hat to Betty. But the foothold proved insecure, and slipping back he called that he would come through a gap which was in the hedge a little farther on, and he then could gather the berries more easily from their side.

So he came.

Quickly he got several small branches that bore the berries, and handed them to Carmichael.

This done, he put out a hand to some smaller ones, and selecting two, gathered them.

"Would you care to have these, Mrs. Carmichael?"

He stepped off the hedge-bank, and bringing them to her, added:

"Could you fasten them on your habit?"

"Thank you. I should like to take them home with me."

Betty's eyes met those of the young man standing near her, his hand held out as he offered the berries. She was resolute. She was

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determined to be mistress of herself, though her heart was beating in a tiresome way and her breathing was quickened.

But finding it impossible to fasten the twigs in her habit while holding both reins and whip, she asked him if he would hold her horse for a minute.

This he did; and the small service rendered he spoke of the loveliness of the morning, including both Betty and Carmichael in his rather jejune remarks. Then raising his hat he smiled and turned away with leisurely step, and made as if to take a short cut across the common, home.

A feeling of elation held Betty sprightly and upright. At least she had not betrayed herself. His brief but perfectly courteous interview, the slight services he had rendered, somehow gave the impression that he wished to prove both to her and her husband his complete detachment; and she rejoiced in that she had been able to meet his impassivity in such a way that like had been dealt out to like.

All the same her heart was sore. Surely he might have shown her a little friendliness—might have asked if she were strong enough to play tennis; or if it were true, as he had been told, that her racket was to rest for the remainder of the season.

Yes, she told herself, she was hurt. He had given her a grievous wound. And why?

But Betty, being a woman, understood.

CHAPTER XXV

FOOTSTEPS

THE next day Peter Carmichael went to London by the early morning train, and in the evening Betty went out to watch, as was her custom, for his return. She occupied a rustic seat opposite the front door, so commanding a full view of the carriage drive, where half a mile or so beyond, the lodge gates could be seen. This seat had been specially placed there on her first coming to Long Ashes.

The whole splendour of the setting sun was upon her, and she sat as in a gilded canopy. The house itself was in shadow. And if the windows were dull, and dark, as if behind them lived no inhabitants, the gilding of the sunshine touched the chimneys where they stood like sentinels in stiff array. Also the tops of the ash trees where the long avenue began at the east end of the house, and opposite to where Betty sat, were splashed with gold.

There was some movement time after time when a swallow—then two or more—swept in curving flight, and with their long-drawn-out

whistle, from the ash trees past the front of the house, then down towards the river where the flies, heedless of enemies, would be dancing in the sunlight.

The clock in the stable-yard had chimed the quarter past eight, and Betty felt it was hopeless to wait longer. If he had been coming home to dinner he would have been back half an hour before. She gave one long minute to watching that turn in the avenue, then drawing the scarf round her shoulders, which she was wearing above her thin dinner dress, prepared to go into the house.

She had found the day long. No one had called. If only she might play tennis she could have 'phoned for someone to come and join in a game. Or if she could have gone somewhere for a game. Or—well—she would leave it at that. She had started upon an uphill track—she must follow it—must—must——

Here she slightly broke her resolution. She would give one glance only down the garden in the direction of the river to see if the swallows were making their way back to the house.

Only one look, she told herself, but in her inmost heart she knew why that one look was desired. The White House stood down there, and its whiteness would be gleaming amongst the trees, for it faced the west and the sun would be shining full upon it. And in that house, possibly at that very moment, sat Hugh Lamley.

She must look just for one brief moment. But in that one moment self-respect ran up its

danger signal. What had she, a wife, to do with a desire, however weak, to see the face of another man! Out with it! Oh, God in heaven, out with it! And yesterday she had believed herself to be so strong!

The dinner was simple in accordance with the tastes of the master of the house, and Betty went through its three courses mechanically. Then when a dish of peaches was put in front of her, and a mere suggestion of wine had been poured into her glass, and the servants had left the room, she rose to her feet, and putting the glass to her lips she drank. "To the King, the City of London, and the Trade thereof"

This toast had laughingly been taught her by Carmichael in the early days of their marriage, when he told her it was her duty to honour it so long as the firm of Carmichael & Son existed in the City. Also, that his grandfather, his father, and he himself whenever he presided at his own table, never failed to propose and drink to it. In turn Betty always did this by his special request when he was absent.

This duty carried out, she turned her mind with pleasurable anticipation upon her dancing. She was inventing some new steps, and it would be a good opportunity for trying them.

So she went into the small drawing-room where a french window opened upon the carriage drive. From this window she could watch for her husband's return, and see him before he could reach the entrance door.

The window was easily unlatched, and she put it open so that he might the more easily enter the room in answer to the call she would give on hearing his footsteps on the gravel. That he would walk home, she knew, having left word a car was not to meet him at the station.

She looked out for a minute. The swallows had gone to rest, and their long, monotonous whistle, which to some ears sounded as a cry of distress, had ceased. The sky was clear and luminous. The light summer air that came in at the window barely moved the curtain which she had tucked back so that Peter, when he came, would find an entrance which was unimpeded.

She began to dance. The twilight was soft and filled the room. Where flat surfaces of the furniture had caught the light, and where deep shadows hitherto had been, all had faded into an equality of dimness. She held the scarf she had worn in the garden, with an end in each hand. She would dance with it. She had seen a drawing of a Greek vase, and on it was depicted a girl dancing, of which every line was a thing of loveliness. This she would try to imitate.

She raised her arms, but the scarf would not float and only rested on each shoulder. Then she moved quickly and the scarf billowed above her in wave-like curves, and with lightness and swiftness of foot she skimmed from one end of the room to the other, pausing in front of a large

mirror which filled almost the whole of the wall space opposite her.

She stood close to the mirror and looked at her own reflection. If she could but keep the scarf fixedly floating! The figure she had seen in the mirror coming down towards her had been arresting. But constant movement was needed.

On the Greek vase the pose of the figure, together with the perfection of line taken by the scarf, were fixed for all time, and its loveliness for the joy of the ages. But in her own case the beauty of form which she had created was gone. No longer could a poetic imagination see in her a white-winged creature poised lightly and moving swiftly as some slender bird.

Her forehead was puckered in thought, but the difficulty refused to be solved, and she switched on the electric lights the better to judge of the effect of this new scarf dance which she was inventing.

Going the length of the room, she pushed the window yet farther open, a playful idea seizing her that to welcome Peter—and there was yet a bare possibility of his having been detained in Town and coming by the late train—with this new dance, would be amusing.

She glanced through the open window. The twilight had been made to disappear by turning up the electric lights, and a tender blue had come in place of the soft greyness that had filled the garden.

She tucked the casement curtain yet farther

back, and at that moment she heard a distant footstep approaching on the gravel, and going to the farther end of the room, held herself in excited readiness for the moment for starting her dance

It must be Peter! She would call him, and tell him to come in, and at the very moment he obeyed her she would begin to dance, raising her arms and holding out her hands to him in welcome.

So she called:

"Come in! I have been waiting and watching for you. Come in and see me dancing."

She could hear the changing sound of the tread from the gravel to the stone step, and her eyes upon her reflection in the mirror, she began to dance. The expression upon her face was one of childlike delight and mischief. Her eyes were bright. Her lips parted. She laughed aloud as she neared the window.

"Tell me," she cried, "do you like my dance?"

She started back half a pace, the colour rising and flooding ears and throat.

"Hugh!"

"Yes, it is I. But it isn't true that you were waiting and watching for me!"

He stammered awkwardly.

"No. I thought it was Peter."

She was panting visibly. Not, however, from physical effort as from excitement.

"You have frightened me," she added.

Hugh Lamley stood motionless, his eyes fixed

upon the woman he loved. He had been taken unawares. This sudden view of her, her attitude, her outstretched hands, the girlish vision of her beauty set in the brilliancy of the lighted room which was framed by the contrasting darkness of the surrounding garden, caused him to lose momentary control of himself.

They stood facing each other, silent and motionless, she a transcending figure of loveliness, he an ordinary man of flesh and blood.

"I came to bid you and Mr Carmichael good-bye," began Hugh Lamley awkwardly. "And I ought not to have come upon you in this unorthodox way. But I saw you dancing—and I can only most sincerely beg your pardon."

"Peter is away. He is in Town," was her rejoinder.

Her breath was coming in short gasps, as one who has been running a race, and who is striving to overcome the outward signs of the strain.

"I did not know he was away. I ought not to have come in."

The speaker threw up his head and straightened his shoulders. He was striving to attain, at any rate, outward composure.

"The whole thing, my going away, has been rushed upon me," he continued. "It was my brother-in-law's idea. I was not intending leaving home till just upon the expiration of my leave. But he wired to me to-day asking me to join him in a fishing expedition. He is

going to Norway, and wants me to go with him."

"I see. I understand." Betty's eyes took on a pitiful expression.

Lamley, noting the change his words had caused in her, went on awkwardly and hurriedly.

"My leave will soon be at an end, you see—fishing will come in all right. I like it well enough—you know what I mean—a man must do something—I don't want to go, God knows—but—I cannot stay here—to go away is very difficult—you do believe that, don't you?—but it is impossible to stay. I wonder if you understand what I mean? I may not stay here any longer. I must go. I am anxious to go before it is too late. You see it, don't you? If I stay longer it isn't cricket."

Betty's face had blanched—had turned as white as the lace scarf that now lay motionless on her shoulders.

"Do you mean that you are going away from The White House? Away from here?" she asked, unconsciously moving nearer to him.

"That is what I mean. I have no intention of returning. I have wired to my brother-in-law that I leave here to-morrow morning by the 5 30 train and will meet him in Edinburgh to-morrow evening."

The two by slow degrees were unconsciously moving nearer to each other. She did not speak. Her face was lifted towards his, and was lighted

by a soft inward radiance, shot athwart though it was with pain.

"Are you saying good-bye to me?" she said.

"My God, don't make it too hard for me, Betty. You know it—you must by this time know that I love you. I cannot help it. I have fought against it. I have avoided you whenever I could—I have tried to play the game."

Suddenly he put out his arms and caught her to him, holding her closely and passionately. He bent over her. He lifted up her face and kissed her on the forehead, eyes and lips.

At that moment a grey figure, which had been about to enter by the open window, paused and stood transfixed. It might have been carved in marble so motionless was it. The eyes were set wide open, the lids never hiding them for the fraction of a second while they kept their tortured stare. In the brilliancy of the electric light the face was ashen colour.

Slowly the figure withdrew as silently as it had paused within the opening of the window.

If there had been anyone in the room to have marked its coming and going it might have been regarded as a wraith. But those within the room, and whom its coming vitally concerned, saw and heard nothing.

With Lamley's arms round her, Betty had begun to cry helplessly, hiding her face against the lapel of his coat.

"Betty, Betty darling."

He spoke very gently, trying again to raise her face towards his, but she resisted.

"Betty, will you come away with me?" he whispered. "Look up at me. See, I will put my arms down if you wish."

She moved slightly as if to free herself, and he gently loosened his hold upon her.

Swaying slightly, she stepped back until she reached the table which she had pushed from the centre of the room when freeing it for dancing. She leaned her back against it, one hand clutching the edge so that her position might be the more secure. Her eyes were downcast while tears trickled slowly, and sobs, broken and shivering, came spasmodically.

Once it seemed as if she were about to slide down, but with an effort she caught herself.

Lamley had started forward, but with her unoccupied hand she waved him back.

"Betty, I cannot bear this. Will you not come away with me? Somewhere—anywhere—India—it is a big place, and as soon as you are free we will marry. You have become everything in the world to me. I am offering you a man's love. I'm no boy. Answer me, Betty—tell me—will you come away with me?"

Convulsive sobs choked her, her head drooped, and this time she would have slipped to the floor had he not caught her. He lifted her up in his arms. He held her closely. He spoke words of endearment. He kissed her hair. He kissed the tip of her ear.

"Betty, come with me. To-morrow be at the north gate leading to the station. We will catch

the mail train for London. Then the boat train, and we will make our way to the Continent."

But there was no response unless a movement of the slight figure could be regarded as one. Gently he put her down, steadying her until he knew her to be secure on her feet. Then he passed his hands down the length of her arms until he held her hands, his strong muscular fingers closing firmly over hers.

"Tell me, Betty," he said, his tone low and controlled, "do you love me enough to come away with me? Tell me, dear."

As if with supreme effort, she drew back from him, her arms held stiff and straight, her hands still in his.

"I will not go away with you—I am Peter Carmichael's wife—but"—her voice trailed off into so low a tone, he had to bend towards her before he could catch the words—"I love you."

Here he made as if he would snatch her to him, but the slender hands, holding his tightly, kept him at bay.

"Tell me what you mean, Betty?" His tone was more insistent. "You are torturing me."

Unwittingly, he must have been crushing her fingers, for she winced and suddenly tried to draw them from his hold as she looked up at him.

He stood in all the splendour of his manhood, youthful and full of the glory of youth, his eyebrows drawn together, his eyes full of the risen tide of love, his nostrils dilated, his lips a little apart as he breathed audibly.

But while seeing him, it was as if she saw other eyes than his; grey eyes that ever looked gently into hers; eyes that were wont to smile at her—lips that ever spoke words to her that were brave and true.

She looked away, her eyes strained in their expression, her lips pitifully set.

It was but a minute, but to Lamley it seemed as if time had ceased to be reckonable, so long was it before she spoke. And then the words came without life—hard—toneless—mechanical. It seemed as though she were speaking to herself.

"Peter is good to me."

She took a long and deep breath.

"To betray him would be a low-down thing to do. Besides, I love my Peter. . . . I am glad when I hear his step in the hall And I like the way he speaks. He is a good man a very good man . . . none better than my Peter."

The expression of her face was changing, and something like a smile came and a tenderness into her eyes.

"I can never do him any wrong. . . . I love my husband. . . . Hugh. . . I speak the truth."

"Betty, I do not understand you. Only a few minutes ago you said you loved me . . . now . . . now, you tell me you love your husband. For God's sake tell me what you do mean. Who, and which of us is it that you love?"

All the wild agitation of a few minutes ago came back upon her. Her chest rose and fell

rapidly, and she caught her breath in quick gasps. She drew closer to him. She still kept firm hold of his hands, but she was resting them on her hips. She was so near to him that when she began to speak her breath came against his cheek.

The words broke from her with rapid utterance and passionate emotion:

"I love my husband—and this is my agony and my pain. For oh, my love, my sweetheart, I could lay down my life for you. Take me once again in your arms and kiss me—hold me close to you. Do you not see that I love you?"

And for a few moments they were locked in each other's arms.

Then she struggled to be free.

"Let me go, Hugh—oh, let me go—remember I am his wife——"

Then he released her, and when he stood back from her, all the wild excitement and passion of love showing in his face, his arms were held down by his sides, the fingers so tightly clenched as to show white at the knuckles.

"I do not understand you, Betty," he said again passionately. "Is it that I have not told you plainly enough of my love? Is it that I have not proved to you that I love you more deeply and truly than ever I have loved any woman? By God, Betty, you drive me mad. Tell me once and for all if you will come away with me? One word is enough. Yes or no!"

She had gone to her old position with her back

against the table, one hand clasping its edge so that she might be prevented from falling, the colour which the emotion of the last few minutes had flooded her face, was gone. She looked white, for a sudden faintness had seized her, but gathering all her forces she said falteringly:

"Let us play the game, Hugh. Help me to be true to Peter. I want—to—play the game."

Her sight became blurred. The figure before her receded—became mixed up with its surroundings—her sight was going. She was turning cold. She was slipping down—was falling. There was a sound of running water—it came round her—it was over her—over ears and eyes.

She cried out faintly for help, but Hugh Lamley was gone, and half conscious she sank fainting to the floor.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SILENCE

A CLOCK somewhere in the house struck ten.

Betty Carmichael was on the stairs that led up directly from the front entrance, her hand resting heavily on the balustrade as she went up wearily and half-fainting

So it was ten o'clock and Peter had not yet returned? But if he were not coming home that night he would have sent her a wire. And there was James at the front door shooting in the bolts. He must be told to leave it open.

"You can fasten the window in the small drawing-room for I am going upstairs to bed," she said. "It is only the front door that must be left open for your master."

The servant coughed behind his hand apologetically, then said:

"Pardon me, madam, but Mr. Carmichael has already returned"

"Returned? When?"

"Can't exactly say, madam. I've been out, but Mr. Giles, he told me that Mr Carmichael

had come home, and had given orders he was not to be disturbed, and went into the study."

The scarf which Betty had been wearing round her shoulders here slipped to the ground, and she turned yet farther round and stooped to take it from the step below her.

Misinterpreting the action, the manservant, believing she was about to go to the study, interposed:

"Excuse me, madam," he said, "but Mr. Giles, he wished me to tell you that Mr. Carmichael gave very particular instructions that on no account were you to go to the study, as he had some very important business in hand. No one—and Mr. Giles said that indeed he might say he was most emphatic, had, in fact, never heard him more so—no one was to be allowed to go into the study."

"Very well, James. It's quite right."

Slowly she went up the staircase; step by step as one who carries a heavy burden. Baffled and weary she reached her bedroom, and throwing off the gauzy dinner-dress, she enveloped herself in a thick white wrapper and threw herself on the bed shivering and exhausted.

With one hand under her cheek she pressed her head deeply into the pillow, lying quietly and without outward signs of emotion. Her head ached as if bruised, and there were distinct throbs of physical pain in her hands that caused her to grasp her fingers tightly.

She wanted nothing, she kept assuring herself

in a monotonous mental refrain, but to go to sleep and forget everything. To sleep for ever. That would be sweet. To get away into silence and nothingness. To go where there was no Peter—no Hugh—no anything. She did not want to see anyone ever again. She wanted to die. It was that which made life bitter—remembering. To have gone away with Hugh would have been easy. . . . But would it have been easy! . . . There would have been the remembering.

The treadmill of thought went on half-hour after half-hour, until at last exhausted she passed into the oblivion of sleep.

The soft dawn of early autumn was creeping past the window curtains of her room, and one narrow shaft of light had fallen across her face.

She moved slightly, opening her eyes for a moment, then closing them again, but only to open them more widely in wonderment at the crushing depression that lay upon her.

Then came the agony of awakened memory. The tide flowed in and over her. Under her breath she uttered the name of God. She invoked Him. Would He help her to escape from the torture of life? She could not meet the daily round—the duplicity that life for ever would now hold for her? And burying her face in her hands she moaned aloud.

But dawn had come, and she must rouse herself to meet this new life. Slowly and with an

effort she looked about the room from one familiar object to another. Then she looked across at her husband's bed

It was a common thing for her husband to occupy himself with business letters after his return home, but she had never known him so late in coming upstairs as this. She wondered what could have detained him, and why he was working until this early hour? Could he be ill?

She hesitated to go to him, for had he not given strict instructions that he was not to be disturbed?

Then a sudden thought came to her out from nowhere, so utterly without foundation did it seem. What if that Silent Visitor had come to him as to his father and to his grandfather, without warning—no pain had run up its red flag of danger—each had passed out silently and noiselessly, seated in an armchair, their hands folded, their heads drooping. What if Peter were seated in his armchair with drooping head and folded hands?

Terror took possession of her. Her heart beat violently, and she caught her breath in quick gasps.

Dare she go to seek him? Dare she go to find him, as they had told her those other two Carmichaels, each head of the well-known City firm, had been found—in that selfsame room—their work done—their strong, simple souls gone?

She threw off the silken coverlet which she

had drawn closer on awakening, and slipped out of bed, dizzy, tired, terrified.

She looked about her, and seeing the glass of milk, always put in readiness for her when she came to bed, drank it off.

Mechanically she opened her bedroom door, while her breath came thickly. He might be ill—her Peter—dying perhaps, and no one there to give him aid.

And so the urge of love and that of a great necessity came upon her, and she went staggeringly out upon the long corridor

The house was silent and had that curiously untenanted feeling that belongs to a house in which all are asleep: inhabited, and yet not inhabited by the living. And Betty in her overstrained and nervous condition, paused on the threshold of her bedroom.

The corridor down which she looked was shadowy and ghostly. The patches of light took upon themselves the forms of the old Miss Carmichaels. There—yes—at the far end of the corridor was Miss Belinda—she knew her by the droop of her head. And—yes—in front of that figure in armour was their father in his roll collar and black silk cravat

She caught her breath and clenched her hands. She dared not pass them.

Then her sight became more accustomed to the strange lights and shadows of early dawn, and the figures melted away into curtains and furniture.

But the air was thick with their presence

They were all round her and whispering to her. She could have cried aloud in her terror.

She thought once that a hand was laid lightly on her shoulder from behind, and she knew it to be the hand of Aunt Betsy Ann—and shrinking and filled with horror she turned round. But there was nothing to be seen but the vista of the long corridor dim and shadowy.

Betty tried to reason with herself. Even if it were Aunt Betsy Ann whose hand had touched her shoulder, was it not her face that she had always loved, and had often paused to look at in the portrait that hung in the small drawing-room?

But her mood did not favour thought. To be swift in her movements might help! So with quick and noiseless step she went along the thick pile carpet of the long corridor, her slender figure in its white wrapper and the silence of her movements, causing her to look like a wraith herself. Her heart was beating violently, but the vision of Peter—perhaps ill and needing her—drove her on.

And now she stood on the threshold of her husband's private sitting-room, one hand upon the handle of the door, which she had but to turn and she would be in the room.

What if he were dead inside? Pray God that he might not be dead. The words did not reach her lips, but they were uttered in a cry of agony from her heart.

She trembled from head to foot. Her knees shook. She grasped the door handle yet more

firmly in order to gain support. She bent her ear that she might catch some sound from within—the rustle of papers—the movement of a chair being pushed aside—some personal sound as of a cough, or yawn, or the clearing of a throat.

But no sound came. The deathly silence she had experienced on leaving her bedroom again encompassed her. She ceased to breathe quickly. The pulsation of her heart had become unnoticeable, rather did it seem as if it were held in an iron vice. Her face blanched. The trembling that had pervaded her whole frame was stilled. Only her eyes, wide open and terrified, told of life.

“Oh, God, that he may not be dead!”

She repeated the words more than once, and each time they became slightly more audible, until the words were changed, and a low-voiced cry for help broke from her lips:

“Father—have mercy—have pity, oh, my God.”

She clung for support to the handle of the door and endeavoured to turn it. At length it gave way and she saw into the room.

It was in the semi-darkness of early dawn.

The curtains hung closely across the windows, a narrow shaft of light alone entering and falling athwart the farther end of the room.

For one minute she stood motionless, then gradually loosening her hold upon the door handle, she switched on an electric light.

The same silence that had enfolded her in the

corridor was here, but if possible it was intensified. Nothing moved. No sound from without penetrated the room. The silence was as the silence of death. She had known this silence twice in her life.

She could see her husband's head above the top of the deep and wide armchair in which he was accustomed to sit with his back to the door, when not occupied at his desk. Why did he not move? Why did he not turn his head as was his custom when she entered, and bid her welcome? Why?

Her heart seemed to stop beating, and losing consciousness, she slipped to the floor and lay inertly, a corner of the white dressing-gown over her face, her hands palm uppermost, her feet caught in under her.

But youth is virile, and before many minutes had elapsed consciousness returned, and gradually attaining a sitting posture, she rose to her feet.

"Peter," she said in a low tone

But there was no response. The grey head that rested against the back of the chair made no movement.

"Peter!"

This time her voice was louder, its tone more agonized.

"Peter—Peter!" she repeated, as totteringly she went in the direction of the armchair.

At length she stood in front of him where he sat as she had seen him many times when he had remained up writing business

letters and she had gone in to bid him "good night."

His hands and arms were resting on the arms of the chair. His feet and legs were in the careless position of one who has been too weary to do anything but throw himself down into a chair haphazard. A deathly pallor was on his face and his eyes were closed.

Betty sank on her knees beside him, and drooping across his knees, she buried her face in her hands. Then she looked up and their eyes met.

"Peter—Peter—speak to me!"

His eyes had the far-off expression of one not fully conscious.

And so the man and the woman remained motionless for a few seconds, then gradually consciousness came into Carmichael's eyes, and his face quivering, he very gently pushed her away from him.

"Peter, are you ill? Tell me." She was still on her knees but sitting back from him.

He made no reply, his eyes no longer on her, but looking far away and above her.

"What has happened to you, Peter?" She spoke in an agonized tone.

She crept closer to him—still on her knees—but the chair on which he sat was by him pushed a little away.

"Was it an accident? Oh, do, do explain what has happened to you." She gave a little whimpering cry.

"I cannot explain."

His voice was toneless, but after a brief pause he continued:

"I am in deep mental trouble—it has been a shock to me—I never suspected it. I saw you both—you and Lamley in each other's arms."

CHAPTER XXVII

DESPAIR

BERRY fell forward. She lay prone at his feet. Her face was hidden. Her hair, bright and golden in sunlight, was of a dull ashen colour in the half-darkened room. She was sobbing, not loudly, but in long-drawn-out, half-audible gasps.

A minute passed and she put out one hand and laid it caressingly over one of her husband's feet. He did not withdraw it—in truth he had not noticed it.

Three, four, five minutes slowly dragged out their sixty seconds, and no further movement had been made. Then Carmichael, as a sleeper awakening who makes an effort to get in touch with the workaday world, took a deep breath and looked down at the figure lying at his feet.

Still he did not speak.

Meanwhile the half-audible sobbing had become the quick catching of the breath as in a child which has cried itself weary.

At length Carmichael pushed the armchair in which he sat yet a few more inches farther away from the prone figure.

After this he spoke, but it was with evident effort, the expression of pain on his face intensified, the tone of his voice hard and metallic.

"Please get up, Betty," he said. "I do not like to see you lying at my feet."

Slowly, awkwardly, she got up, staggering slightly as she went towards a chair that stood near, and grasping its back, steadied herself with its help.

"Is there anything you want to say to me?" he asked

"Help me, Peter—I am all alone—I want to do what is right—I want to be true—I want to be honourable——"

She was struggling to control her sobbing. She caught tight hold of the chair-back. She stood upright. She tossed the hair that had strayed over her forehead into its place.

"I never kissed him before, Peter. . . . Until last night he has never held me in his arms . . . but . . ."

The sentence was finished by Carmichael:

"But . . . you love him"

"I swear it is you I love. But a mad kind of passion seizes me and carries me off my feet, and I long for his presence, and I cry sometimes because I want to hear his voice"

"Surely that is love, Betty . . . love such as you have never felt for me."

She began to walk about the room dis-

tractedly, tossing her arms about wildly and waving them above her head.

"You are not trying to help me, Peter," she cried. "I am caught up by feelings I don't understand. . . . Yes, yes, I do love Hugh Lamley, I would go with him to the ends of the world . . . yet . . . yet . . . I should be afraid."

Under the stress of her emotion she gasped for breath, as does a runner when nearing the goal. She never once looked at the man—her husband—while she crossed and recrossed the room, now along its length, now its breadth

Carmichael got up and went towards her.

"Betty," he said, "you must sit down and try to control yourself. You are half-killing me as well as yourself by this wild talk"

He led her towards the couch, but she refused to sit down.

"I have told you everything that ever has happened," she said, still speaking excitedly "Until last night he never spoke one word of love to me. You believe me, Peter! So what have you against me?"

He stood looking at her for a minute, then spoke just the words:

"I have nothing to say to you"

Hesitatingly she went towards him, and when near enough she laid a hand on each shoulder, looking up into his face with distraught expression.

In no way did he make any response. His arms hung inertly down at his sides. His head was held erect, even though his eyes were look-

ing down into hers. And with those few words which he had spoken, it seemed as if no further utterance would come from his lips.

She waited in eager expectation, believing he would say something that would make the situation less tense. But the minutes passed and he made no movement, excepting that his eyes were no longer fixed on hers, but looked above her head into vacancy. Presently he closed them but remained silent, while his nostrils were slightly extended with each breath that he drew. The lines round his mouth and between his eyebrows were deepening, and the pallor of his face was increasing.

"Peter, speak to me," she whispered imploringly.

Opening his eyes, he looked down again into hers.

"Have you nothing to say to me?" she cried, and her hands took hold of the lapels of his coat, holding on to them with tightening grip.

"I have nothing."

"*Nothing!*"

"No, Betty. I have nothing further to say than that you are at liberty to leave this house if it is your wish."

"But I am your *wife*!"

"Not now. You have laid bare your feelings for Captain Hugh Lamley. How, then, can I hold you in my arms as my wife?"

"Are you going to drive me away from you, Peter?"

"I am not driving you away. . . . If you go,

it is because you want to go. . . . If you wish to stay . . . that is, if you wish still to have the protection of my roof . . . you can stay."

This was spoken in broken sentences and with evidently great effort.

"You mean I may stay——"

She did not attempt to finish the sentence, it was too pregnant with meaning, and she dared not say the words her heart prompted her to say. So Carmichael finished it, but not as she desired.

"You may stay, Betty . . . but not as my wife."

She swayed and fell forward towards him. It was then that he caught her in his arms, but the act was that of one who instinctively reaches out to one who is falling. He did not draw her to him—merely held her so that she did not slip to the floor

"Listen to me, Betty Lift your head off my arm Try to be calm for a few moments. There, that is better. No good comes of crying No one can undo the past."

She appeared to be slipping, in spite of his hold upon her, down to the floor. So he passed one arm round her waist in order to give her more secure support

"God knows, Betty, that I do not wish to be unkind to you, or to appear hard, but——"

He broke off abruptly and a convulsive spasm passed over his face. His teeth closed tightly upon his lower lip, his brows knitted, then he broke out with the words:

"Remember, Betty, only a few hours ago I saw you in Lamley's arms."

"Will you not forgive? Peter—Peter——" she moaned.

"I cannot forget. What I saw is branded upon my brain."

"But in time?"

She moved slightly, and the arm that held her closed about her more firmly.

"I cannot tell, Betty. It may be that some day . . . some time, perhaps . . . I do not know. . . . But you must leave me now. Last night I sat here in mental agony. To me it was a vigil, kept with death. . . ."

He broke off again abruptly, and it seemed as if the brave embankment of his sufferings threatened to give way.

"You must leave me, Betty. See. I do not want to break down before you. I am suffering and full of agony. Go, please. Leave me to myself."

His arm fell from her waist, and as a man who has just risen from a bed of sickness, so he stumbled and fell upon the couch.

"Betty, throw back the curtains and open the window. . . . I want to see the dawn. . . . I want to sleep. . . ."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE DAWN

It came slowly A pale amber glow that gradually changed to gold deepening to rose as the great orb made its first appearance as a narrow bar of light A cloud soft and fleecy stretched out lengthwise, first amber then with a swiftness that was almost startling it, too, reddened when it spread itself across the sky. Then in the silence and majesty of its rising came the sun, a great orb of light, its rays as yet far off but travelling with lightning speed soon to fall upon the trees, the garden, the flower-beds that were in front of Long Ashes

A monotonous shade lay upon all these things, until the minutes passed, the sun's rays completed their long journey, and light was upon the garden Everything sprang into sudden and vivid light The night was passed; the darkness was gone; day had come to the earth and life reigned everywhere. A lark high up in the heavens sang with sweet, monotonous trill, and away far down beyond the village, a cock crew. Then came the barking of a dog followed by distant lowing of cattle

The restless hum of nature had begun; and

soon to follow, the busy commerce of man in the rattle of train and hoot of the early motor. The earth had had its time of sleep, and now the sun had come bringing its hours of sunshine in which men and women must work.

Peter Carmichael was looking into his desk, sorting out some papers, a tray standing near him with coffee and a rack of toast. The latter did not appear to have been touched.

His shoulders were unusually bent, and his head dropped forward. His face bore the marks of the night's vigil. His eyes no longer looked out with their mild and tranquil expression. They were bloodshot and sunken. His mouth told of suffering, the lips at times parting to give vent to a long, deep-drawn sigh, to be firmly and tightly closed.

After a time the papers he wanted were taken out, sorted and put into a wallet. He leaned back in his chair, his eyes fixed in vacancy as he turned over several thoughts in his mind.

Yes, he would send for Mrs. Giles. She would follow out his directions. And putting his hand under a corner of the table he rang an electric bell.

In due time Mrs. Giles appeared, stout, elderly, with a puzzled and rather harassed expression on her face, for had not her husband told her that something must have gone wrong with the firm of Carmichael & Son, for the master had never been in bed all night, but had spent it in his study.

Mrs. Giles and Thomas Giles, her husband,

were old retainers, the one acting as house-keeper, the other as butler. Both had known Miss Betsy Ann and Miss Belinda Carmichael, and both had a clear recollection of their father, Peter Carmichael, the second of the name. They had grown up under the shadow of Long Ashes; one had started as pantry-boy, the other as under-housemaid.

Each had welcomed the coming of Betty. A wife was sadly wanted, they had both declared, the only pity being that one had not been brought earlier. They wanted children—several of them—to be running about the house and about the garden. The sound of childish voices and of laughter would bring life into this house with its memories of dead and gone Carmichaels. That it had made a fitting background for the young and beautiful girl who had been brought into its rooms, with their large mirrors and Victorian furniture, had never been disputed by them. Only carpets and curtains had been renewed. And the dancing, flitting young figure, was, they considered, rightly and suitably housed.

Mrs. Giles stood near Carmichael, one hand resting on the back of his chair. She stooped a little towards him, for had she not as a young girl dandled him in her arms, and was she not, therefore, in privileged position, differing from all the other servants.

He raised his face towards her, moving slightly in his chair, thus meeting her gaze in an effort to appear at his ease.

"I shall not be back to dinner to-night," he said, and cleared his voice, which sounded hard and thick to himself.

"Are you not so very well, sir?" The old face was held closer as she peered earnestly into his, laying one hand gently upon his shoulder.

"Nothing to fidget about, Sally. I have had a bad night, that is all." He tried to clear his throat again, so metallic did his voice sound.

"It isn't business, is it? Thomas and me's anxious for the firm—so many have gone down since the war."

"The firm is all right—so far as I know. I think possibly the hot summer has affected me. I don't feel very well. However, Sally, good soul, do not worry about me. What I wanted to see you for, was this—I mean to be in Town for some days, so do not expect me back until you get a wire from me. And in the meantime I want my old bedroom in the east end of the house put into order for me. Will you see to this?"

Mrs. Giles looked closely and hard at him; and then touched his forehead carefully with a bent forefinger.

"You do look bad," she said. "Your forehead has such deep lines in it. I wish you would see the doctor."

"No, no, Sally; no doctor for me."

"But, sir, you should for our sakes; for all of us, and for the sake of that bonnie young wife of yours."

"Sally, my good woman. Oh, for heaven's

sake do go away. And tell James to see the car is round to take me to the station in time for the 9.45 train. And that I want him to pack my suitcase with clothes to last me a week "

And so Mrs. Giles went slowly out of the room, her anxiety greater than it was when she entered it.

Later in the day, when opportunity offered, she said to her husband:

" It isn't the firm that's causing all this trouble —it's something else "

But she did not say what that something was. She was wise in her generation. But she did not like the master's old room to be prepared for him. It boded no good she said to herself again and again.

CHAPTER XXIX

OFF NORWAY

HUGH LAMLEY was leaning on the taffrail of the steamer.

It was one of those clear, windless nights that are at times experienced in early autumn in the Norwegian fjords. The sky, a narrow strip only between the mountains that bordered the water on either side, was translucent, the stars, planets and the small specks of light which were suns millions of miles away, giving out a soft radiance. No sound could be heard where Lamley was resting against the rail, saving the swish of the water as the ship passed swiftly on its course. Even the waterfalls were but broken streaks of light upon the mountains as they came into view.

He had taken refuge in this rather deserted place in order to avoid talking with the two men who had sat next to him at dinner, and who were now "doing their mile." The regular pad of their tread had at first disturbed him each time they came to his end of the vessel; finally

he did not notice it, until it suddenly ceased. Evidently the task of "doing their mile" was accomplished, and he could only hope they had not seen him and would come to pick up the argument which had not been satisfactorily closed at the end of dinner for either of the disputants.

(Lamley was in that particular mood when a man is out of temper with himself and with the world. For had he not acted as a fool in falling in love with Betty Carmichael, a husband barring the way to any honourable end? And this sea trip was not affording him sufficient distraction to keep his mind from dwelling upon her. He passionately regretted that outbreak of a love avowed at Long Ashes. He cursed himself for acting in a way that had flung all restraint to the winds, for had he not sworn again and again to himself that he would play the game and act as an honourable man in the house where at one time he had frequently broken bread. Up to that episode he could bring no charge of unseemly behaviour against himself. But—and here he would bitterly curse that insane moment when he had even gone so far as to force an avowal of love from her. There was no excuse for this to be found by him.

He tried to find comfort in the thought that he had asked her to leave her husband and go away with him, and at the moment it seemed as though the act were honourable *Honourable!* Nay, assuredly his honour rooted in dis-

honour stood. Mentally he cowered before the thought.

"Oh, my God!" he exclaimed under his breath, "surely some devil incarnate must have made it impossible for us poor mortals to undo the past!"

Lamley threw the end of his cigarette into the sea with a passionate gesture, and putting a hand into his breast pocket drew out a letter which had been given him at Bergen. He was in the mood when a man is inclined to curse every woman. The letter was from Mrs. le Jarbey.

It was entirely his own fault, he was telling himself. Mrs. le Jarbey had, according to her habit, thrown herself in his way during the past two months, and he had availed himself of this in order to avoid being seen with Betty Carmichael. And now Mrs. le Jarbey had dared to write to him, presuming on the few attentions which she had of late dragged out of him, and referring to that damned Indian episode of his subaltern days. She had even said, in effect, that there had been a time when she had thought his whole mind and attention had been set upon Betty Carmichael, and that it had been a case of being off with the old love and on with the new. But she now knew, she wrote, she had been mistaken. "Thank God," the letter ran, "I was mistaken. You have been, and still are, true to me."

These unpleasant thoughts were suddenly broken into by the voice of his brother-in-law.

"So you are here! Couldn't tell where the devil you had put yourself."

"I came here straight from dinner."

"There's dancing going on in the *salon*."

"Is there?"

"I've been dancing with Miss Quirk. Rather a nice girl."

"Possibly."

"You seem in a bad way to-night"

"Jolly rotten"

"What's the matter?"

"I'm wishing every woman was at the bottom of the sea."

"Who is it this time?"

The speaker laughed, and taking a step nearer to Hugh Lamley, leaned also on the taffrail, looking down at the white wash on the water. And finding there was no answer coming from his brother-in-law, he said banteringly:

"I was told—it was Gwen told me—that you and Mrs. le Jarbey were on again."

"Gwen was a damned little fool to say so. If there is a woman in this world I hate, it is Mrs. le Jarbey."

"That's the woman you carried on with in India, isn't it?"

"As a fool of a subaltern."

"She must have been very good-looking; she is handsome now."

"Glad you think so. I don't."

Fortescue laughed jeeringly.

"Can't you get rid of her?" he asked.

"No, I can't. She is always cropping up."

"Wild oats are unwise things to sow. Come on, Hugh, let us go downstairs. If we are lucky we can find someone ready for a game of bridge."

CHAPTER XXX

THE NEW LIFE

BETTY wondered if it would be difficult? Had he not made it quite plain to her that she might remain at Long Ashes if she chose, but not as his wife. That was clear, the inference being that if she continued to live at Long Ashes it would be but as a guest

But experience proved that she was still to be regarded as the head of domestic affairs, and as ruling over the household servants. She found that Mrs. Giles, as well as the other servants, treated her precisely as they had always done. Mrs. Giles came each morning as usual to consult her about the menu for dinner and other household matters. But Betty was surprised and not a little startled when Giles presented himself also, asking if it would be convenient for her to see the chauffeur and the head groom each morning after she had seen Mrs. Giles? adding apologetically as he coughed behind his hand, that Mr. Carmichael had himself said it was his express wish that these two men were to come to Mrs. Carmichael and take the orders from her.

This action on the part of her husband, by

which the men who did not belong to the indoor staff were to come to her each day in order to ascertain her wishes, though it might be unusual, Betty felt, could not be classed as uncourteous. But it did not belong to the old life; it had no part in it, and of this Betty was fully conscious.

Then later, when Betty inquired if Mr. Carmichael still rode out in the early morning, and was told that the hour itself had been changed because of the growing lateness of the year, and that on those occasions he would have an early breakfast served in his own room, have his ride and be met by a groom at the station who would take the horse from him, while Mr Carmichael went off to London, Betty felt this as a change in their outward life that signified a deeper change in their relations. He had made no sign of these early rides—had never hinted of them. Did it mean that never again would he ask her to ride out with him? She shrank from the thought. To her it seemed as if such action would ever widen the distance between them.

On other days they would meet at the breakfast-table, he punctual to the minute, when they would exchange the usual morning salutations as is seemly between host and guest, and make the usual standardized remarks about the weather.

Everything happened which does happen for the most part at English breakfast-tables. Coffee was poured out and the aroma made the room fragrant. Then the cover was lifted from the bacon which did its part by emitting so savoury

a smell as to stimulate the appetite. Letters were opened and read, but in this case no comments were made. But why should there be? A host and his guests do not usually receive letters of common interest

The Times was opened by the master of the house, duly propped up and read. Occasional questions were asked, such as pertained to the needs of the breakfast-table; whether more coffee was required? Might the marmalade be passed. One question was stereotyped: "Are you going up to Town to-day?" And it received always a monosyllabic reply. If "Yes," the watch was pulled out and looked at.

In the evening the guest and host would meet again, if, that is to say, the master of the house returned for dinner. Sometimes a wire would be received by the housekeeper with the words "spending night in Town," in which case the guest would dine alone.

And it so happened, the host now spent many nights in Town. When he did return in time for dinner, the conversation was less formal than at breakfast, the menservants being present, for appearances had to be preserved, this having been tacitly agreed to by both parties. Towards the close of the meal, the butler filled his master's wineglass with port, and put such few drops as had always been stipulated by his mistress into the guest's glass. When the door closed on the servants both host and guest rose and drank: "To the King—the City of London—and the Trade thereof."

A few minutes would elapse, the sound, perhaps, of a nut being cracked, or the click of a silver knife and fork upon a dessert plate being all that broke the silence, when the guest would rise from the table, the host quickly, so that he might reach the door in time to open it for her. Then followed the quite courteous little nod and smile, and the two words: "Good night."

That was all. Thus ended most of the days.

But the rôle of guest tacitly assigned to Betty, and as tacitly accepted, was too hard. She sickened under it mentally and physically. When Mrs. Giles, with kind and anxious eyes, urged her to see the doctor, saying she was sure she was ill, Betty put aside the idea with a laugh that, however, did not always ring true.

"But why not go out a little," urged the old servant. "You used to ride out with the master, and now he always goes alone."

"I don't care for riding when the weather is dull."

"But you are looking so pale and tired."

"I know, Mrs. Giles. Never mind. Now let us talk of the puddings, they are always a bother."

And about this time—it would be the beginning of October—she would furtively watch her husband when at his breakfast, to note if his eyes came in her direction. He always seemed to know if she were in need of anything—the marmalade, the oat-cake, the apple which usually formed part of her breakfast, and when not within her reach would pass it to her. Yet

never did she see that he so much as glanced at her. As she became assured of this fact, a little ache came into her heart. She wanted to be noticed by him. She wanted him to say something to her beyond the standardized, "Can I pass you anything?" She wanted to have a part in his personal life. The need took hold upon her sharply. Through dinner he did ask questions, made a remark, or said something that necessitated more from her than a monosyllabic reply. But she knew perfectly well why this was. The men-servants were present. Their informal breakfast could be treated differently.

After this, slowly as the sky reddens towards sunset, did the fear take shape within her that his love for her was going. And as with the redness of the sunset that spreads from the horizon to the zenith, so the idea took possession of her that if she lost his love it might never be regained. And the cold blankness that follows a sunset fell upon her, for in admitting the possibility, she saw foreshadowed the difficulty of whipping into life a love that had been chilled into the stillness of death.

So it was that Betty Carmichael tried the pitiful little devices that alone seem to be the resources of the good woman. A small book-stand was found and put on the breakfast-table, the more securely to support *The Times*. And such wild flowers that yet remained were sought for and put upon his dressing-table, or in front of the desk in his study. And she saw that a plate of fruit was put upon the breakfast-

table, believing that if laid before him they might be relished. But none of these poor devices attracted his attention in the way she desired. *The Times* rested where she placed it for him, and now and again some of the fruit was eaten, but beyond this no notice was taken of her efforts.

Yet she had nothing of which to complain. He was the perfect host in courtesy and kindness. But he was different. Never did the light come into his eyes when he smiled at her; and such was the sense of a barrier between them that she had ceased to feel natural in his presence.

She was growing cynical about her position. She had struggled and overcome her love for Hugh Lamley. She could hear his name without any quickening of her pulses. Her love for him had been but a mirage of the desert, she told herself, a glowing and beautiful something that had melted away, leaving her stranded with nothing that lay before her but a Sahara of sand, dry, arid, without refreshment of greenery or of water. And yet she had seen feathery heads of palm trees, and pools of water that mirrored the sky, and soft mists that had blown over the scene, lifting, falling, melting away, and coming again. And now all the loveliness had gone.

It was at this point that she would become conscious of a sudden outrush of love towards her husband, followed by the back-wash of the bitter avowal that she had lost his love.

like to go out and judge for myself what it is that is wrong."

Betty made a slight movement which, however, merely denoted that she was listening.

"I feel it is right I should tell you this, Betty."

Her face flushed and then as quickly paled, while the hand that was lying inert upon the edge of the table was closed tightly.

"Betty, I want you to be candid with me."

He was leaning forward in his chair and towards her, his eyes fixed on her face with painful intensity.

"Will you tell me, Betty, if it will matter to you—my going?"

She got to her feet with deliberation. She stood very erect, her head thrown slightly back. Then she said with clear enunciation:

"It will not matter in the least to me. Why should it?"

"I hoped, Betty, you perhaps would have said it did matter."

Peter Carmichael had also risen from his chair. He stood motionless, his face assuming a waxen hue, while his eyes never lost their expression of painful intensity.

"You asked me to be candid, did you not, Peter?"

"I did."

"Then I take you at your word, and I tell you quite plainly that your going away to Kenya will make no difference so far as I am concerned."

Betty took no time to reason with herself, but

was carried away by the wild surge of emotions that had overmastered her. She was conscious of passionate love for the man she now had but the one conscious desire to lash with words that would be most likely to cut deep. She noticed the growing pallor of his face, and that there was intense pain expressed in it.

Then with the quick intuition of love, she knew that another such outbreak of the frantic desire that was within her to test his love, might end in the *débâcle* of that love. She said:

"You startled me—you have been a little abrupt with me. I shall, of course, miss you, Peter—and—and if I appeared unsympathetic, I did not mean it."

"I am afraid it is I who am to blame, Betty. I shall give you timely warning before my plans for going are quite settled."

He saw she had begun to move towards the door, and hastened to be in readiness to open it. The waxen hue of his face remained, but something of the expression of pain that Betty had seen, was softened.

Looking up at him as she said the customary "good night," Betty saw that the falling in of his temples, which she had noticed with a pang of late, had increased that night. And to the customary words: "Good night," she added the words: "If I pained you, Peter, I am sorry."

He smiled down at her and she thrilled to the kindness expressed in the smile.

CHAPTER XXXI

IT IS DIFFICULT

As when a stone is thrown into a mill-pond the eddies caused gradually subside, and it becomes calm and outwardly unruffled, so with the disturbing of the placidity of the dinner-hour at Long Ashes when it was broken by Peter Carmichael's sudden announcement to his wife of his intention of going to Kenya to see to the branch there of his business, and of her reception of the tidings.

They met at breakfast the next morning with the usual greetings. The morning was cold for the time of year. A pity if winter was closing in upon them so rapidly. Yes, rather more sugar in the coffee if she did not mind. No, he was not going up to Town that morning.

The Times was opened with the usual rustle, and the sound of the back of a hand striking away the creases. And it was propped up upon the reading-stand. It slipped—was patiently replaced. The cup was handed across to be refilled with coffee, and the question was asked if the coffee had been sweet enough. And so

the meal passed stage after stage. To all appearances it had been just as all other breakfasts had been for several months.

Then Betty did a thing that was unusual with her. She took an apple off the dish that stood between them and peeled it. The scene which had been enacted the night before had left her distraught. She believed herself to have been cruel. Yet she had seen, as she believed, that the words and actions which she now stigmatized as cruel, had in reality proved that her husband's love for her was yet existent. But to take joy in this was surely a ghoulish act. She could have wrung her hands and pressed them together to try to ease that internal ache from which she was suffering.

She put the peeled apple upon a plate and took it round to where her husband sat. He did not appear to notice it. He sat with a laden fork half suspended, his attention upon the threatened fall in rubber shares.

And Betty stood silently by him. She noticed the quickly greying hair on the temple, and how the temple itself was falling in. And the sunburn that came of those early morning rides—that healthy colouring of his face that had always marked him as differing in her eyes from other men—was gone.

And distraught she stood beside him. She desired to stoop down and kiss that fallen-in temple. But what if she received a repulse! So instead, she quietly put the plate with the peeled apple near him on the table.

It took him a moment to understand. Then with inquiring eyes he looked up at her.

"I have peeled it for you," she said.

"That is very kind of you, Betty." He did not wish to say he did not care for an apple that particular morning. He hesitated.

"You would rather not have it?"

"If you will forgive me?"

She took up the plate with the apple and moved away, he turning at the same moment to look at her, with a hand stretched out as if it sought one of hers. But she, not seeing, passed on to her own side of the table, and the act was lost upon her, while he with the hungry look in his eyes that they had worn the previous night, withdrew his hand.

It was verging upon Christmas and the gardeners at Long Ashes decorated as usual the lounge and the dining-room with evergreens; and the winter so far proving mild, there had been an abundance of holly berries which had helped with their bright red to lighten the sombreness of the greens.

The housekeeper's room, as also the kitchens, had been decorated; and Mrs. Giles had gone so far as to buy a sprig of mistletoe from the village grocer's. But remarks had been made upon the fact that no mistletoe had been brought home by Mr. Carmichael as on the previous year, when a splendid bunch had been handed over to his wife on Christmas Eve and hung in the lounge.

"How curious!" Miss Parker (Betty Car-

would carry out her seeming intention of passing on what would appear to be a message from Betty herself to Hugh Lamley, Betty could only say, while the blush deepened:

"I beg, Mrs. le Jarbey, you will do nothing of the kind."

The words were spoken hurriedly and with some asperity, Betty at the same time instinctively looking across at her husband. Had he heard?

He must have heard, for turning his head at the same moment, he looked at her.

Perturbed, Betty that evening rode silently homeward in the car by the side of her husband. She felt that painful memories must have been awakened in him as they had been in her by Mrs. le Jarbey's words. And might not these bring in their turn suspicion, doubt, things most calamitous and hard to refute, such as she had been hoping were gradually fading from her husband's mind. She glanced at him unobtrusively once or twice, always to find his head turned away from her, as if absorbed in what could be seen through the window of the moonlit landscape. She was nervous and apprehensive, not specially because he had not spoken to her since entering the car, for riding in complete silence had become common to them, but fearing, as she always did when chance brought Hugh Lamley's name into conversation, that Mrs. le Jarbey's distasteful questioning might serve to emphasize her position as guest at Long Ashes.

window that night in early autumn? Was she never again to be his wife? Never to be anything but this silent sharer of his meals? The breath of scandal, so far as she knew, had never touched them. They mingled with all the country's small social diversions, acting in what to the common eye appeared quite an exemplary manner.

But Betty became more and more conscious of the slipping away of all vitality and a subduing of all the girlish spirits that formerly characterized her. As for her dancing, never did the inclination come, either for inventing or for the act itself, which at one time filled her with joy. Motoring was fast becoming the one and only thing which brought her any relief from the anxiety that was seldom far distant, that never again would the relationship between her and her husband be that which savoured of love and camaraderie. Moreover, his half-announced intention of going to Kenya for an indefinite period was as a background to all these thoughts. Should he go, surely that would mean the end of all possibility of reconciliation.

In imagination she would at times make plans for a motor tour, something that did not have its beginning each day and perforce its ending before nightfall.

Then when the middle of January came with its lengthening hours of daylight, Betty Carmichael's plan for a motor tour took shape. It should be to Cornwall. Her mood craved for high winds and tossing seas. She wanted a

coast with rocks. Long sandy beaches did not appeal to her in her present mood. To see waves come lashing forward towards walls of rock that stood as battlements, and hurling themselves with terrific force, break into foam and spray, appealed to her imagination. She wanted something to happen in life. Something that would stir up its monotony. Something with which she could wrestle, even if it were to be overcome by it. Yes, she must get to Cornwall and hear that hungry sea which eats up ships and men.

She would ask Peter about it that very morning as soon as they had got through their usual formal greetings, and the coffee poured out, and the rashers of bacon put on the plates. He would not object. Why need she hesitate? Had not each of them arrived at a stage of complete indifference as to each other's comings and goings?

She was in a slightly embittered mood

But somehow to embark upon the subject was not so easy as she had anticipated

His face was in full view as he bent forward reading *The Times*, and she thought him looking older. There was a line between his eyebrows that suggested suffering. She thought it was a new line.

Then unexpectedly to her, he raised his head and looked at her inquiringly.

"What did you say, Betty?" he asked

"I was not speaking"

"Sorry."

He looked back at his newspaper, but when Betty had seen his face wholly free from the shelter of *The Times*, she noted with compunction its careworn expression.

Would it worry him, she thought, this question of the tour in Cornwall? She hesitated, then finally asked him, without circumlocution, if she might have one of the cars in order to spend a few days in a tour of Cornwall.

He again looked up, his expression abstracted, his mind on the rate of exchange in Wall Street.

"Did you say a motor tour?" he asked.

"Would you mind if I went on my own for a short tour?"

"Is it not early in the year?"

"The days are lengthening."

"Shall you take Graham?"

"If I may."

"I should not be comfortable at the thought of you being driven by John."

The speaker returned to his newspaper as though the subject were ended. But a few minutes later he looked up again.

"How are you going to manage about hotels?" he asked.

"Do you mean about tips and things?"

"Rather more than that. In fact, I shall not feel happy about your travelling alone."

"I shall take Parker with me."

"Certainly. But I shall arrange with Cook that you have a courier."

"How kind you are to me, Peter."

"Partly for my own peace of mind." He smiled at her, one of his old genial smiles.

"Thank you so much—dear Peter." She added the final words rather spasmodically, greatly daring.

She wondered if he had heard them, for he, stooping at the moment, retrieved *The Times* that had slipped to the floor.

"On what day do you wish to go?" He rose from his seat as he spoke.

It hardly needed a moment's consideration with her.

"On Monday next, please," she said.

"Monday next." Taking out his note-book, Carmichael made the entry.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE DEPARTURE

It was Monday, the day when Betty Carmichael was to start upon the motor tour in Cornwall.

At the front entrance at Long Ashes stood the Rolls Royce, with evidence for travelling in its luggage carrier strapped to the back, and luggage in front where later Graham and the courier would sit.

Behind the Rolls Royce stood the small car used for running Peter Carmichael to and from the station.

Parker, Betty's personal maid, was standing talking with Mrs. Giles, the latter feeling upon such an occasion as her mistress setting off under the charge of one whom she styled "the courier," that it was her duty to see her start.

"I do not like the idea of this motor tour," Mrs. Giles was saying in a low, confidential tone to Parker. "It's my best hopes that all will be right. Graham is a careful driver, but when you are told to drive fifty miles an hour, what are you to do? Obey, I say, and then smash!"

"Oh, really, Mrs. Giles! The gentleman that is going with us, he'll see to that."

"The cowler? Not he. He may be very clever, but he can't go against the death watch. I have heard it two nights now in our bedroom, and I 'ave spoke about it to Giles. But he makes light of it—says it's a beetle tapping for its mate. Men are that silly. They're all right for some things, but not for what I would call wisdom. And Giles is only a man."

Parker was looking between her eyelashes at the "cowler," noting that he was young, nice looking, with a very clean-shaven face and dark eyes, and she hoped that he was unmarried, for if that were the case a flirtation would be not only feasible, but quite to her liking. So quickly indeed did Parker's thoughts travel, that she felt a marriage with such a man would not only be pleasant, but full of advantages. For as an employee of Cook he would doubtless be able to take his wife with him on, perhaps, a percentage of his journeys abroad. And she loved travelling. Yes, that must be her first endeavour, to find out if he were married. Graham would do that for her; she often helped Graham's wife in the question of what would be fashionable to wear for the coming season.

So all that Parker had really caught of what Mrs. Giles had said was something about men; and fearing that Mrs. Giles had in some mysterious way followed her musings, hastened to say that she would never "walk out" with any woman's husband.

Mrs. Giles bristled all over her person.

"It may be that you will never get the chance,

Miss Parker. Giles is a man not given that way. He has his faults. But it's women with pretty faces that make men run crooked, never a plain one."

Parker, not seeing any connection with herself and the "cowrier," replied at random, until the conversation got into the safe channel of the number of picture post cards which would be required by Mrs. Giles to keep her "contented."

Meanwhile, in the dining-room, husband and wife had remarked as usual upon the weather as they seated themselves at the breakfast-table, and that it was pleasant to see the promise of a fine day. But neither made any reference to the tour which was to be started upon at ten o'clock that morning.

However, when Betty rose and left the table to prepare for her journey, her husband, instead of leaving the room as usual, turned his chair sideways to the table and continued reading *The Times*.

Betty was away but for a few minutes, and as she came in he looked up, and seeing her in hat and fur coat, rose to meet her.

"I hope, Betty," he said, "that you will enjoy your little tour. I have done my best to arrange everything to your liking. The weather seems promising——"

"Thank you, Peter How kind." Her voice trembled and the tears were not far off. She stood near the table and laid her gloves down on it.

"On Saturday," her husband went on, "I paid in another hundred to your banking-account. So you can buy as many post cards as you like" He smiled at her. A tired smile such as a man may give at the end of a long day's march.

She did not smile back again, only looked up at him, her lips trembling, her eyes glazing with unshed tears.

"I wish I were not going," she said.

He was startled.

"But, Betty——"

"Oh, of course I shall go. It is too late now to change my mind."

"You are sure to enjoy it." He spoke encouragingly.

"Oh, I don't know, Peter But at any rate let us bid each other good-bye here in the dining-room"

He went towards her, holding out his hand

"Will you not kiss me, if only this once?" She held up her face.

He, stooping, kissed her forehead.

"May God keep you and send you safe back again."

"To you?" she whispered.

"To *me*," he said

That evening, depressed and disturbed in mind, Peter Carmichael wired to Mrs Giles that he would dine at his club, but would return that night and would walk from the station

The night was dark and still, and Peter Car-

Michael noticed the intense darkness and silence of the avenue of ash trees after passing the lodge with its brightly curtained windows. Then there was a faint sound. It was scarcely more than that caused by a bird moving restlessly upon its perch, or the falling of a solitary beech leaf from the hedge beyond the trees. Far off an occasional tram could be heard, coming gradually within earshot, and as gradually going away, and once the steady, rhythmical trotting of a horse far off. But these sounds served but to accentuate the silence which for the most part closed round Long Ashes.

As Carmichael got within sight of the slanting lights of the dining-room, his hearing was again attracted by a sudden rustle among the lateral bushes that bordered the carriage drive at that point, and startled. Carmichael called out somewhat peremptorily asking who was there.

No reply was made but the sound of the rustling aside of the branches increased, until the murmur could be heard stepping out upon the gravel.

"Why the deuce don't you answer me?" called Carmichael.

"Because I don't want to answer," came in muffled tones. "I am here for a purpose."

"At any rate, I recognize your voice. Aspendale so you need not trouble to disguise it. But why come upon me in this strange way?"

A low, chuckling laugh was the reply, and

Carmichael knew that Aspendale was within a few yards of him.

"Look here——" began Carmichael.

"I will explain myself," interrupted Aspendale. The tone of his voice was fawning, and but for the darkness of the night it could have been noted that the soft, white hands were being rubbed the one within the other, in an expostulatory fashion.

"It is in this way," he went on. "You seem to be avoiding me, and I resent it, resent it very much indeed. I sent a note asking you to dinner, and after the delay of two days comes a reply written from your club, saying you were in Town. I call that discourteous. You will agree with me?"

"I don't see it. When I'm in Town how can I dine with you?"

"You could return and dine with me"

"I have much business in hand"

"I cannot believe it, Carmichael. Besides, why do you avoid riding with me? Your horses must be eating their heads off, not only your own riding horse, but Mrs Carmichael's. At one time you were ready to share my morning gallop; now—oh, no, anything for an excuse."

"Come to the house with me, and have a cigar," said Carmichael in a conciliatory tone. "Then we can perhaps talk about a gallop together. To tell the truth, Aspendale, I have been a bit off colour for some weeks, and have not been riding as often as usual."

As he spoke his depression increased, and the foreboding of evil which had been with him all day, but he felt that at all costs he must get rid of this intruder upon his privacy.

"What is it you want?" he asked.

"I want you to ride with me to-morrow morning, as usual," was the eager reply.

"Very well, I will. But it must be at 7.30, not earlier. The mornings are too cold to go out at seven "

In such a manner was the last ride arranged

And as Aspendale turned away he rubbed his hands noiselessly, and chuckled with the deep content of the homicidal maniac who sees his victim entrapped.

CHAPTER XXXIII

TRAGEDY

THE sun, a pale orange disc, was as yet but a little above the horizon, the mist which obscured it lay as a thin veil over the wide stretch of country in front of Long Ashes. Long Ashes itself was clear of the mist, as was the moor beyond and the high ground to the north. But it was a somewhat dark morning and the light was slow in coming, and as the two men, Aspendale and Carmichael, met in the lane leading to the common, the orange disc slowly passed behind a cloud, and the day became colourless.

The road was slightly muddy, and the riders had not reached the open common where the sandy sub-soil and the short grass made pleasant going. But if the moor was high enough to be above the mist the air was chill and damp. There was a rawness in it that caught the throat and chest.

Carmichael gave a sudden shudder, of the kind people give occasionally, and as a reason say that someone has walked over their grave. Then noticing the chilliness of the morning buttoned his coat and turned up the collar.

"What is the matter?" asked Aspendale.

"Nothing. The morning is Novemberry, that is all."

The two men had been riding abreast, each with his head carried straight and his eyes upon the common in front of him. At least this was the case with Carmichael. With Aspendale it was deceptive, for he was watching his companion with a sinister expression, his dark eyes looking out of their corners.

"Let us have a gallop," he said. It was part of his plan to reach the far end of the common.

So with loosened rein the two men set off, riding neck and neck, down the space on the common which was clear of furze bush and brambles. Then as this open space narrowed Carmichael took the lead, and touching his horse with his spurs, went at a gallop, his horse at full stretch.

Being depressed, he sought relief in the quick, bounding movement of the animal beneath him. A more than usually sleepless night had followed upon his wife's departure.

The riders quickly gained the distant point in the common, where riding, so far as a fairly clear course could be obtained, had been reached, when Aspendale suggested they should extend their ride by going by what was called locally the back of the common. This meant obstructions of rock and tree roots, and in places but a narrow bridle-path. Carmichael disliked it, for both horse and rider would be compelled

to pick their way, and with his real love of horse-exercise this kind of thing did not appeal to him, and weary and out of spirits he opposed the suggestion.

"That is about the only bit of common unfit for horses," he said.

"I don't agree with you," was Aspendale's contention.

"Hang it all, Aspendale, I for one came out for exercise. I never meant to go at a walking pace. And it will have to be that if we go back the way you suggest."

"But I have come out for a particular purpose. I want to go along that bit of ground rotten with rabbit-holes and thick with half-hidden stones, to see if this horse I am riding is as careful and observant as he should be."

"But you have always said what a careful beast he is."

"Damn you! What does it matter what I have said?"

Here Aspendale struck his horse heavily over the neck with his riding-crop, causing the horse to wince and turn sharply.

"What a brutal thing to do! What has come over you this morning?"

"I'm not in a mood to be contradicted, so you had better look out."

"If you are trying to pick a quarrel with me, I'll give in. Life is too short for that sort of thing. Lead the way and I'll follow."

"No, you must lead the way." There was a sneer on the speaker's lips, and he hugged some-

thing that he was carrying under his coat more tightly.

"As you will. But if either of us come to grief, on you be the blame."

"Shall I call heaven to witness?"

"I think heaven can take care of itself."

So saying, Carmichael turned his horse's head in the direction indicated. In truth it mattered little to him which way he went. The cheerless January day mirrored his mood; and his thoughts constantly went to his wife in speculation as to her welfare.

A sudden gust of wind blowing as it would seem from nowhere in particular, caught up the dead leaves that had fallen from some stunted oak trees near which the horsemen were passing. The wind threw the leaves into their faces, round about them, scattering them along the broken ground until they came to a final resting-place in the hollows.

"It will be blustery in Cornwall," thought Carmichael, looking up at a few crows which were circling wildly low down over some trees. They were attempting to plane, but were swept aside by the force of the wind, which sank with apparently as little reason as it had risen.

Carmichael looked down again in order to help his horse over the broken ground, and as if from nowhere and with the same suddenness as had come the gust of wind, so a sudden foreboding fell upon him. It was evil and sinister. It was without form, but he shrank from it as a man will shrink from a threatened

physical blow. He turned cold and gave the same kind of shudder as had passed through him a brief half-hour before.

He turned his head so that he might glance backward over his shoulder at his companion.

Aspendale had a revolver in his hand and was examining the trigger, looking down the barrels, laying it caressingly against his cheek, as a girl will lay a letter from her lover. Suddenly he looked up at Carmichael.

"What the devil do you mean by watching me?" he cried. "Turn your damned head the other way and look to your going. Another moment and you will be in h——"

When the eyes of the men met, the formless foreboding took shape with Carmichael. He saw he was in the power of a homicidal maniac and fear paralysed him.

There was no way of escape open to him.

He pressed his knees more closely to the saddle; his eyes widely open with terror, he sought for the safest bits of ground for his horse, tightening the reins while he touched its flanks lightly with his spurs.

Only a dozen yards had he gone when the sharp report of a revolver startled both horses. Aspendale's swerved slightly, but was quickly brought round by bit and spur.

Carmichael's had been checked by the tight clutching of the reins which had been involuntary, as the bullet entered between the shoulders of its rider. Frightened, it stood still for the few moments its master's position remained

upright; then as he dropped forward upon its neck, and from its neck slipped down over its shoulder to the ground, it gave a terrified snort, and tossing its head, jerked the reins from the fingers which no longer had power to hold them. Hesitatingly, its head high, it trailed its master a couple of yards before the safety stirrup which held him gave way, then with head and tail erect it started off at a wild gallop.

Aspendale looked down at the motionless figure upon the ground which was bleeding from the mouth; and with loud, maniacal laughter, stuck his spurs savagely into his horse's flanks and started off over the rugged ground, his horse stumbling, saving itself, then stumbling again, until a cleared place in the common was reached, where the short grass nibbled by the sheep made safer going.

"Tally ho!" Aspendale cried, brandishing the revolver high above his head. "Forward—forward, tantivy—for a-hunting we will go!"

He shook his bridle reins. He goaded his horse into yet further efforts, its neck outstretched, its nostrils showing red.

"Ride to h—I," he shouted. "On, on, my beauty. Faster, yet faster. On—on."

Loud laughter punctuated these words.

His horse had taken the turn safely at the end of the common, and was making for that part of the common where the ground slopes suddenly and a railing guards the almost precipitate fall of some two hundred feet to the river.

This railing caught the attention of the madman, and with a wild hoop he pulled at the reins and turned his horse's head full towards it.

"By God!" he cried, "I'll see for myself whether there is a heaven or a h——l." And riding full at the low railing, his horse took a flying leap into space, and with a downward crash carried both itself and its rider to their doom.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE SOS

"PARKER, are you not glad you have come out with me onto the cliffs?"

"Yes, very, madam."

"And this wind! Isn't it fine? And does it not take all one's strength to battle against it? And my silk scarf—blown straight out from my neck! There! Did you hear the wind lashing it until it cracked like a whip?"

"Yes, madam. But you are getting to look very tousled, if you'll excuse me for saying so."

"I don't mind one bit. I am so happy that I want to dance all the way across this bit of smooth turf."

"It is some time, madam, since you did dance"

"One has to be very happy if one wants to dance."

"But surely, madam, you ought to be very happy. Such a beautiful place as you live in, and such a husband as you have got."

"I've never been happy since the Tourna-

ment. It made me ill. And one cannot be happy if one is ill."

Then Betty Carmichael subsided into silence. Her eyes were bright, and the wind had turned her cheeks into the likeness of June dog-roses. But if she were not speaking, her lips were smiling, and words were being softly whispered:

"May God keep you and send you safe back again—to *me*."

It was but yesterday these words had been spoken, and Betty dwelt upon them, hugging them to her heart.

"He would not have said that if he had not meant it," she was saying to herself "My Peter is true and splendid."

She had fought a good fight. She had won through. It was quite easy for her now to think of Hugh Lamley with equanimity; and her love for him had fallen from her as the autumn leaf, leaving all that is of sweetness and value to the sunlight and air.

Light-hearted, girlish, she began to dance along the top of the cliff, pausing at times to look at the wildly tossing sea. It fitted in with her mood. Her spirits rose and she would laugh aloud at the sea-gulls that came swooping down near her with their raucous cry. They, too, were running with the wind, they, too, were carried along with planing wings, to right themselves with a strong downward beat and then the curve of an upward sweep.

"Peter, Peter, my husband, my darling; come to me on this wind."

With widely opened arms, and lips apart, she ran forward with these whispered words, while he to whom she called lay silent, motionless and undiscovered at the back of the upland common

It was later in the afternoon, and Betty had fallen asleep in front of the wood fire, to be aroused by Parker making apologetic noises with the fire-irons.

"I really felt, madam, I must awaken you. The tea has been standing for more than an hour."

"I do want some tea certainly, but go and send the courier. I want to arrange an outing for to-morrow."

He came, slight, well built, well dressed, well brushed, and listened attentively to the request made, that if possible she would like to reach Land's End the following day, before the high wind that had been blowing for hours had settled.

"I specially want to see the Light House, with the waves dashing round it and over the rocks," she said.

"It is going to be a storm to-night, madam; at least that was what was being said in the smoking-room."

He stopped abruptly, evidently his attention being caught by voices in the passage upon which Betty Carmichael's room opened

The voices got nearer. They were excited. Then when the speakers got close to the door

Betty was startled, and a sudden dread fell upon her that this man was the bearer of evil tidings. Her face whitened, but she did not move, only sat looking up at him with widely opened eyes.

"And if you are Mrs. Peter Carmichael," the ponderously spoken man continued, "you are asked to go to a place with a peculiar name—it was about trees, the name was—er—yes—trees. I hope, madam, you will excuse me giving you the message so badly, but you will understand my difficulty, for those gentlemen at the B.B.C. only give it once, then off to something else."

"Madam, it is this"—Parker was now speaking, laying her hand gently on her mistress's shoulder—"the master is evidently ill because you are asked to go home at once."

"My husband ill!"

"Yes, he is ill"

Parker hesitated; and when at last she found courage enough to speak, her voice trembled and was so low that it was only Betty who heard what she said.

"The message was—dangerously ill."

Betty stood up, silent and motionless, breathing a little heavily. She was vividly alive, as one fatally injured can be conscious of life. Yet she remained motionless and silent.

"What will you do, madam?"

It was Parker who spoke, her whole bearing showing her to be unnerved and incapable of suggestion.

Betty's eyes were turned upon her, and the

CHAPTER XXXV

THE STORM

THE car started off into the night.

The wind blew from a south-westerly direction, and came in strong gusts, bringing the rain against the windows of the car with a clashing sound. The powerful lamps made but a poor headway into the black curtain of the night. And the difficulty of driving the car was intensified by the rain streaming over the wind-screen, the rain sweeper proving of little avail in such a storm.

They had but just turned out of the grounds surrounding the hotel when a vivid flash of lightning made clearly visible the roadway for a few yards, followed instantly by such a crash of thunder as to appear as if all heaven's cannon-balls were being emptied out above the travellers' heads.

"Oh, madam, it isn't fit for us to try to get back to Long Ashes to-night."

The girl clasped her mistress's arm, and clung to her during the reverberating roll of the

thunder and the clashing sound of the rain, which in less than a minute was falling in such a way as to suggest a cloudburst.

The car swerved slightly, as though it had been horse-drawn and the animal had cowered down in its terror.

Graham swore under his breath, either at the severity of the storm or at himself for having been sufficiently startled to give the steering-wheel a wrong turn.

"I doubt," he said to the courier who was sitting beside him, "if I can reach Long Ashes to-night in safety. I can neither see nor hear properly."

But the courier spoke encouragingly, and so they plodded on.

Once Graham was sure they had got off the road and were driving on turf, so he pulled up and the courier got out to find if possible where they were.

"Off the road itself certainly," was his report, "and so far as I can make out we have open moorland on both sides of us. Raddle Moor, I should say it is, and our best course seems to me to push straight on after getting upon the road, for if this is Raddle Moor there is a garage about four miles ahead of us."

So on again in the darkness and blinding rain, getting a little off the road at times, and fearful of running into some belated travellers who, like themselves, could see but a few yards ahead.

Betty Carmichael, closely wrapped in her

furs, was leaning back in her seat with its luxury cushions. She was quite composed. There was no inclination to cry. The blow which had fallen upon her had been severe enough to cause a deadly numbness to settle upon body and mind. It was only in the rare moments when she allowed herself to dwell on the thought of what life would be for her without her husband that a spasm of agony shot through her.

So when the promised garage was reached, and burning its beacon light of hope, Betty got out as requested, quite calmly, and went into a small waiting-room, dimly lighted and badly heated, but at any rate it was a shelter from the hurly-burly of wind and rain which lashed and fought with everything outside.

"No, do not loosen my coat, Parker. Just let me sit quietly until I know what the men think would be best for us to do."

And so, white and passive, Betty sat on; while the window casement rattled and shook, and the chimney at times refused to carry the smoke upward. To Parker's inquiries as to how she felt, the reply came slowly and hesitatingly.

"I don't know how I feel. I think I have no feeling. I only want to ride on and on and on. Then perhaps I would fall asleep. And when I awoke perhaps all this would seem but a dream. I don't know. I cannot talk. I cannot think."

The hours dragged slowly on. Once the

woman of the house brought them tea and cake, which Parker readily drank and ate, Betty drinking the tea but only by persuasion of Parker.

Gradually the force of the wind dropped, and the rain no longer beat upon the casement and corrugated roof of the shelter, and there came a hint of the darkness being less impenetrable. It was then that Graham showed himself in the shelter, a very different chauffeur from the spruce one that usually presented himself before his mistress. The stress of driving in such a storm on roads that were unfamiliar had told upon him. His eyes were strained and blood-shot, his forehead had the lines upon it caused not only by concentrated thought, but by an endeavour to pierce the intense darkness that had baffled him. So often had his cap been pushed back, that his usually smooth, well-brushed hair lay in strands about his forehead. His coat was slightly loosened at the neck, and his tie.

"I think, madam," he began, "that the worst of the storm is over, and if you wish we might make a start."

"Very well, Graham."

"I have refuelled in case we are longer on the way than might be expected."

"How long will it take us to reach home?"

Graham hesitated.

"I am afraid I cannot say. A man passing here, a man walking, has just stopped to say that on the road ahead of us a tree has fallen

and blocks the way, so we shall have to go back for a few miles "

"To go back! "

This meant delay, and the words penetrated the close-fitting shell of numbness which enclosed her, and she gave a short, gasping sigh.

"Let us start at once, Graham," and with the words the passivity of her expression was changed, and Betty stirred as if awakened into life.

On the eastern horizon signs of dawn were coming. It was but a slight lessening of the darkness in those spaces where clouds lifted slightly, one above the other. But still it was the coming of the dawn. Darkness would have to give way and creep gradually westward.

The wind still was high and strong gusts blew the clouds into heavy masses; and tearing and breaking up these masses sent them before it in wild, scudding fragments. But the rain had ceased, and the fury of the elements no longer expended itself in lightning and mimic battle. Certainly the worst of the storm was over.

Betty Carmichael realized this and took such comfort as she could from it. At any rate it was making the journey more possible, and each milestone passed meant a mile nearer home. And as the dawn grew into twilight she began to recognize objects in the landscape, and realized that in a very brief time she would be going up the village lane, and so to the entrance lodge at Long Ashes

Her heart began to beat violently, and the

passionate desire which at one time had held her, to be at the very door of her home, was now changed to a wild kind of fear, so strong that it was only by an effort she restrained herself from bidding Graham to drive more slowly.

But the car sped on, faster, so it seemed to her, than at any time through the night.

The lodge gate was standing wide open. Evidently she was expected. But she did not look out. Her whole mind was occupied with the knowledge that from a particular point in the carriage drive she would be able to see a certain bedroom window in the east end of the house.

Suddenly the bedroom window came into view, with a light burning behind the curtain. Therefore he lived! Blank darkness would have meant death.

Betty breathed quickly and audibly. The tension that had held her bound as if by bands of steel suddenly gave way. Nothing restrained her. Spasms of agony shot through her. She became one throbbing mass of pain. And putting her hand to her heart, Betty fell forward unconscious

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

THE shadow of death hung over Long Ashes.

Doctors came and went. Hope flickered into life, then as a candle after an upleap into flame dies down, so it was in that sick-room, and telephone and telegraph were set to work with spasmodic fear.

Then would follow silence, gravity of face, and slow movement of foot as if it feared to tread, and the slackening of shoulders and the droop of head which belong to hope extinguished.

Silence hung as a canopy over the place, while the daily routine of life moved automatically and resentfully. Why had the daily routine to be carried on, when upstairs in a darkened room a life was being fought for? Should not the daily routine be slackened—should not the household pulse of life beat slow when that other pulse was being watched, its quickened or retarded beat registered and scrutinized by eyes intent upon the revelation given out? Would it not have been more seemly if all life had stood still with held breath, to give space as it were for that other life?

The days seemed to hold more than their allotted hours, but they did not equal the nights. Those hours of darkness spent in anguish, counted more than the hours which ticked themselves out upon the clock in the stable-yard during the hours of daylight.

So it appeared to the girl who sat in the window-seat of her own room. She tried to count the number of days which had passed since that night of storm and stress in which she had driven home from Cornwall. Parker had told her it was just eleven days, but she had disbelieved Parker, though in no way could she herself reckon up the days and nights. Could it in truth be eleven nights since she had lain awake hour after hour in the dreadful silence—and the corresponding number of days in which she had sat in this window-seat always looking out at the gardens and the sky?

And every few hours one of the nurses brought her news from the sick-room. The patient had taken a spoonful of nourishment—there had been an hour of sleep though somewhat disturbed by dreams—no, he had not asked for her, though he had been conscious for a few minutes; never, in fact, had he spoken of anyone by name—he had asked for his horse to be brought round; he wished to ride, he said. She was sorry, but the night had been bad, and with great difficulty they had got him to take a little nourishment—yes, the restlessness of the night was continuing; no, they did not think him in reality worse, but they were uneasy.

And Betty dropped on her seat in the window, and when they brought her food she waved it aside. She could not eat, she said No, she was not faint. She could easily sit there hour by hour. Nothing would make her better until her husband was better. She found it easier to be without food—the food created nausea. And she bid Parker leave her—she would ring for food when she required it.

Then Mrs. Giles came up to see her, but she could prevail nothing. It was very kind of Mrs. Giles, and so indeed it was kind of Parker, but she herself really knew the best. Yes, she would promise, she would take a glass of hot milk later.

Then she fell to watching the clouds again. They were drifting slowly eastward, just piles of downy white, and rarely changing their billowy outlines. She found watching the clouds more restful when they changed their forms so slightly as to be comparatively motionless. It was at night that she was most restless—on moonlight nights, when the clouds chased their way across the moon in a mad kind of frolic. At such times she would hold her breath, and was sensible of the quick beating of her heart. But when the moon stood, a great round disc, and but light wisps passed over its face, the moon being at full, a great wave of sadness overwhelmed her. For what took place on that eventful night nineteen hundred years ago, had really happened, she mused. He who had stepped out from under the shadow of the olive grove had

come into the brightness of this same moon at the full. And the moon had shone cold and aloof and impassive, non-human, while His great human heart was breaking. And ever since then the cry had gone up from millions seeking that the cup of agony put to their lips might pass. Yes, it was ever the same.

On the morning of the eleventh day Betty shivered and wept where she sat amid the cushions on the window-seat of her room.

She was praying as those other millions had prayed and were still praying, that she might not be compelled to drink of the cup which had been drained by the Man greater than other men.

Exhausted from want of sleep and food, she slipped lower on the cushions against which she leaned, and closing her eyes she strove to shut out the scene in that bedroom on the east front which was ever before her.

She saw the long, straight figure motionless upon the bed, the grey head resting on the pillow, the face colourless, the eyes closed, the lips slightly parted as if to help the laboured breathing.

She had never been allowed to touch him, to kiss him, or so much as to speak to him. Absolute silence was to be kept, and anything bordering on emotion was taboo.

Slipping yet lower on the cushions, she ceased crying, and it may be that she slept and perhaps dreamed: she never knew.

A pale gleam of sunshine suddenly broke

through the clouds that had been packed on the eastern horizon and fell across her face. The morning mist floated away leaving the sun unobstructed.

And to Betty it was as though she were standing in the glow of an eastern sun. The ground in front of her was white with the whiteness of an eastern street, and so with the flat-topped houses. In front of her stood a palm tree, its fronds gently waving in the breeze. And the breeze was warm as she had known it in northern Africa. And she heard a murmur as of many voices. They came nearer, and she reached out a hand to take hold of her husband's arm, he being with her, for she was excited as well as frightened, and sought the comfort of his presence. Then a voice raised itself, as it were, from the murmur made by the crowd of people who were advancing towards her, and the voice said:

"Jesus of Nazareth passeth by."

And holding firmly to her husband's arm, she looked at the man who was walking a little in advance of the crowd. He was not like the man she had seen in the pictures painted by the great masters. This man wore a long white robe, a portion of which covered His head as a protection from the sun. And the face was swarthy; the thin, short beard was black as were the eyebrows. And as the man drew nearer, she saw that in appearance the man was very much like the type of man she associated with the East. But when close to her, and when He

looked at her, she saw that the eyes were unlike any she had ever seen. Their expression was one of great gentleness, and their gaze was penetrating as One who knew all that she had ever done. In passing He looked down at her and smiled, turning His head ever towards her till He had got beyond where she stood. Then it was that her husband took her by the arm and bade her come home.

One of the nurses was standing by her, a hand laid lightly on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry to awaken you," she said.

Betty suddenly brought back from another scene looked vacantly at her, the nurse's white dress tending yet further to confuse her.

"But you are not—where is He—where has He gone," she exclaimed excitedly.

"Hush, hush! There is no need for you to be upset. Sir James is still here—has been here for half an hour."

"But it was beautiful—and now it is gone."

"You have been dreaming," the nurse said soothingly. "You would like to come to see your husband? Sir James says you can if you wish. He is a tiny bit stronger than yesterday."

So Betty went stumblingly, as she had done each day, to look again upon the long, motionless form, the ashen face with its closed eyes.

Sir James was standing at the foot of the bed, and silently he beckoned her to come nearer, taking firm hold of her arm to steady her, and steering her so close to the sick man that Betty could, by stooping, look closely into his face.

"I have brought your wife to see you, Mr. Carmichael," said the doctor in a quiet, low tone, then turning to Betty, he said. "Speak to him; he knew me a minute ago."

And Betty, clinging to the doctor's strong hand, trembling and agitated, did as she was told, and stooping, put her lips to her husband's. He kissed her feebly but with love expressed.

"Little wife," he murmured, "so you have got back."

Then she broke down "The strong embankment" of the breast gave way, and the doctor's restraining hand was once more laid upon her arm, while forgetfulness and confusion of thought fell upon the sick man, and he babbled about his horse which had fallen with him—he asked for it to be brought round—no, he was too tired to ride—yes, it was a rabbit hole—what about going up to Town——

Here the weak voice trailed away into silence.

And the days and the nights passed on in their dreary march, until one of them dawned on which the great London surgeon said Peter Carmichael would live; the convalescence would be long, but his splendid constitution would carry him through, backed as it was by the simple and regular life that he had led.

So when the sun glinted into the bedroom so long tenanted, they told him spring was coming, and that if he would look out he would see its signs in the fields and hedges. Moreover, his room was to be changed.

And Betty gathered wild flowers where they

grew in profusion in a field near by, and bringing them into his room, she decorated it, laughing in her ecstasy that the hill of convalescence was not proving as steep as Sir James had predicted. And he, her husband, caught her hand as she passed his invalid chair, her hand so strong and firm, and held it for a minute in his white, blue-veined one—and then he raised it to his lips.

"Betty, I want to be taken into the garden," he said

"And you shall, if the nurses will let you."

Gradually strength returned, and he saw how the brown buds of the ash trees were bursting and showing the loveliness of their green. And he watched the rooks taking their high, steady flight. And when the sun shone at the day's end he would sit and listen to the thrushes and the blackbirds giving their evening song.

And all the sweetness and hope that belong to spring filled the garden at Long Ashes, while Peter Carmichael gained in strength. And presently he no longer needed the support of Betty's arm, and would try, as a child does, to test his walking powers.

It was early evening, and the twilight was beginning to creep over the trees and low-growing plants, and Peter, who had been walking alone, stooped down to Betty, who had playfully occupied his long invalid chair, and taking her face between his two hands kissed her, and as he still held her face, said:

"Let us have another honeymoon, Betty. I

am feeling well and strong enough, and we will go again to Como and stay at the Villa d'Este."

Betty, disengaging herself from the still thin, delicate-looking hands, sprang up, and throwing her arms round him laid her cheek against his breast, crying:

"Peter—I could go to the end of the world with you—to the end of life."

He held her in close embrace, and she heard the whispered words:

"I thank you, oh my God."

If you care to visit the gardens of Long Ashes—and they are worth going to see! I know them well—they are not difficult to find. And if you are in luck's way, you will see a little toddling child playing with his nurse. This is Peter, the fourth of that name, and the sleeping partner in the well-known firm in the City of *Peter Carmichael & Son.*